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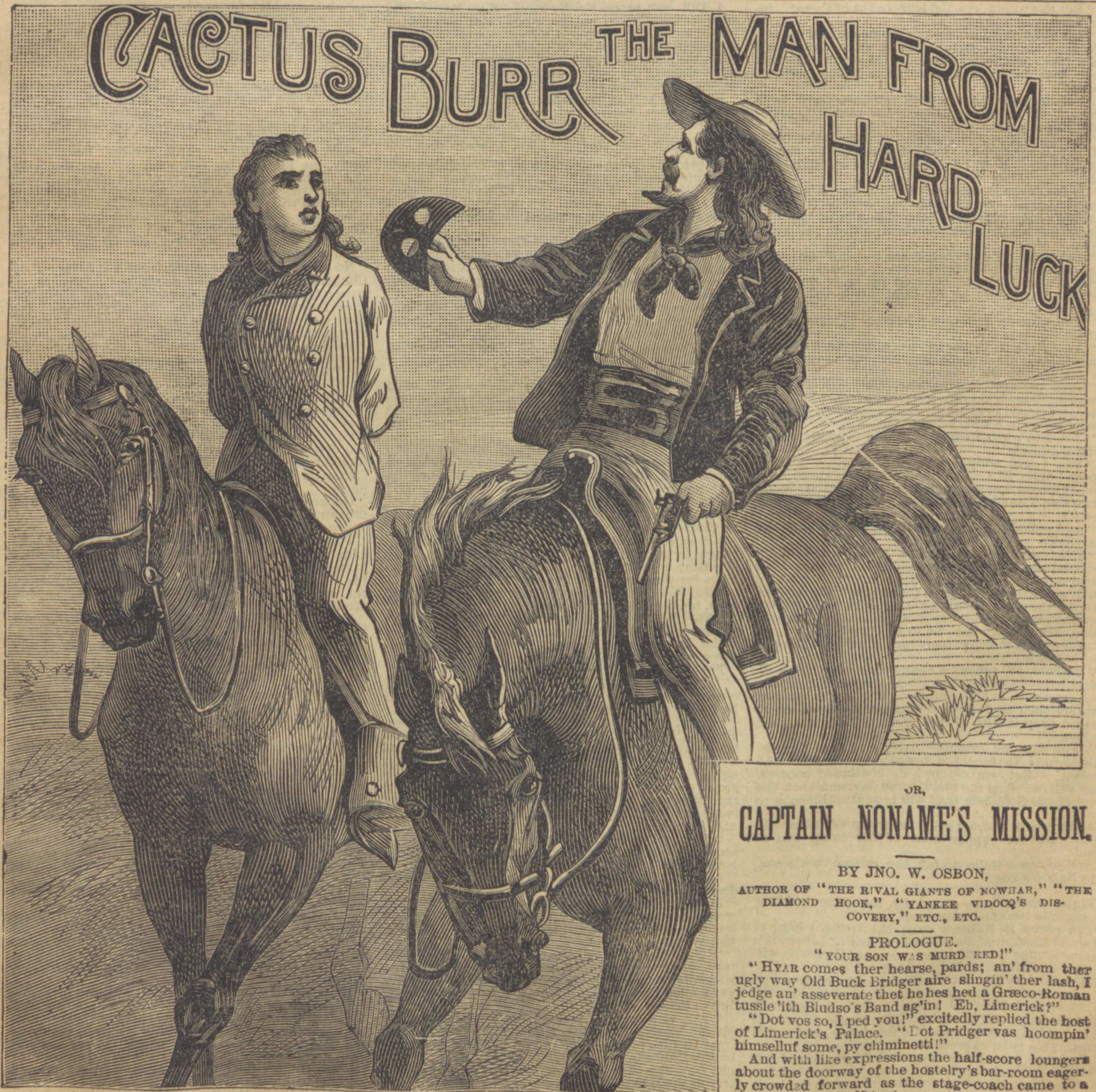
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OR, CAPTAIN NONAME'S MISSION.

BY JNO. W. OSBON,
AUTHOR OF "THE RIVAL GIANTS OF NOWHAR," "THE
DIAMOND HOOK," "YANKEE VIDOCQ'S DIS-
COVERY," ETC., ETC.

PROLOGUE.

"YOUR SON WAS MURD'ERED!"

"HYAR comes ther hearse, pards; an' from ther ugly way Old Buck Bridger aire slingin' ther lash, I jedge an' asseverate thet he hes hed a Graeco-Roman tussle 'ith Bludso's Band ag'in! Eh, Limerick?"

"Dot vos so, I ped you!" excitedly replied the host of Limerick's Palace. "Dot Pridger vas hoompin' himselluf some, py chimineti!"

And with like expressions the half-score loungers about the doorway of the hostelry's bar-room eagerly crowded forward as the stage-coach came to a halt a few paces distant.

Then, as a dozen rapid queries rung out, a lithe,

"GREAT GOD! CAN THIS BE YOU, CARLOTTA DANE, YOU THE ROAD-AGENT CHIEF?"

supple form dropped lightly to the ground from beside the driver on the box—the form of a ruddy-faced, blue-eyed youth near his nineteenth summer apparently, dressed in a neat suit of gray, his waist encircled with a belt of arms.

"Is Major Axfell here?"

Not loudly spoken, but enunciated so clearly and distinctly that the words seemed to ring above the clamoring voices; so fearless and yet so quiet and unobtrusive, in tone, that to a man those of the camp's denizens present turned and stared curiously at the youth.

"I left the major in his office but a moment ago, my lad," quickly responded a tall powerful-looking fellow—no less a personage than Saul Temple, the marshal of the camp. "Yon small building, just visible in the twilight, is the place."

Then turning to the veteran on the box, the speaker continued:

"You ran afoul of Bludso's toll-takers, Buck?"

The driver uttered a grim chuckle.

"Nay, nary!" giving his arms a tragical fling, "Twar the gang w'at run afoul ov us!"

"Say g'loots, slap yer peepers on yender little hunk ov bone and muscle slidin' fer the major's office, will ye? Squint keefully an' take his measure fine. A game-cock of purest strain aire that same lad!"

"A tende foot, Buck?"

"A live-coal, fresh from Brimstone, pard!"

"His han'le?"

"Bollo Axfell, the major's son!"

"But the toll-takers, Bridger—what of them?" interposed Saul Temple.

"Humph! Nothin' ov quinquence, Pard Saul. We kem through ontched this trip, but thar's cold meat at the big bend on the trail. Lordee! how that pesky kid can han'le a par ov sixes, pards!"

"Subdue your feelings until you have given us an account of the fight," urged the marshal, just a trifle impatiently.

"Es ef I war not!" sniffed Bridger disdainfully. "Don't be so offishus, Saul Temple. Cain't c'rk m'self entirely. Now, le's see—et happened 'bout like this:

"Left Golconda this mornin' 'ith one passe'ger—youn' Axfell. Everything war serene until we reached ther big bend, late this a'terno n, w'en Bludso an' his men jumped ther outfit in regulation style.

"Thar war on'y one thing ter do—hol' up! An' that war w'ot I tried ter do, w'en, quicker 'n flasht-lightnin', su'thin' cold bumped up ag'in my head an' thet haydoogia ov wil'-cats, young Axfell, sez, sharp an' quick:

"You whip an' pull through, Buck Bridger, or yer cabeza's a sieve!"

"An' 'ith that he began ter pump lead at ther gang 'ith his other six, a man dropin' at each shot an' faster 'n ye c'u'd count!

"Tork ov appearances deceivin'! Gents, thet bread-an'-butter kid aire jest a whirlgust ov de'th—a compressed cyclone ov destruction, or I'm the meanest liar in Nabob's Bar! He—"

"You laid whip, I suppose, Buck?" quietly broke in Saul Temple.

"Yas, I laid whip," snorted Bridger. "W'ot ye s'pose I did? Ef I sat still, et war sure de'th; ef I run, et meant a chance fer life. An' putt yer stack down thet I han'led ther ribbons ther best I knowed how!"

"And pulled through unharmed," commented the marshal.

"W'ich same war more then Bludso's men did," declared the driver, with a sudden relaxation of his facial muscles. "Ha! ha! Saul Temple! Wish ye c'u'd 'a' see'd et! Fu'st on ther right, then ter ther left, an' then straight ahead, all quicker'n ther play ov a rattler's tongue, ther p'izen kid socked his lead home, fer keeps. An' he won ther bluff, too, fer Bludso an' his men got back fast. Tork ov vigilantes! He! he! Saul!"

"Vigilantes!" echoed a heavy base voice, from directly behind the marshal. "A good thing, gentlemen, as a rule, in this country. But in the present instance their usefulness is impaired by the Jack-o'-lantern propensities of these festive knights of the highway."

"True for you, Idaho!" exclaimed Saul Temple, half-turning to face the bearded giant who had spoken. "But, emboldened by continued success, they will overstep the mark some day, and then the trees of the Golconda trail will bear fruit hideous to see."

A few words more, then the group of idlers dispersed, for the supper hour of the camp was at hand.

And so came Rollo Axfell, the mine-owner's son, into Nabob's Bar.

Eight weeks have glided by, maturing budding spring into blooming summer.

The scene is Nabob's Bar; the twilight hour is again at hand, and about the doorway of Limerick's Palace lounge the self-same group of idlers who witnessed the advent of Rollo Axfell.

The stalwart form of Saul Temple alone is missing. A pale, slender, blue-eyed man, of years beyond fifty, fills the place of the absent marshal; his hands toy restlessly with the butts of the weapons hanging at his middle, his eyes sparkle feverishly, and on his mobile face is an expression of deep concern.

A strange hush holds sway over the group—a hush which is suddenly broken by a rapid beating of iron-shod hoofs and the dull rumbling of wheels far down the winding trail upon which all eyes are fixed.

"She comes at last!" utters the bearded giant, his tones strangely hoarse and unnatural, as he turns almost fiercely toward the slender, blue-eyed man.

"Fie! Axfell! Put off that death's-head look! Your cub's all right—a round thousand backs the opinion!"

No word is vouchsafed in response. Major Axfell mechanically makes his way through the gathering crowd, then halts to await the approach of the stage.

On comes the ramshackle vehicle, Old Buck Bridger plying his whip relentlessly. As he rounds up before Limerick's Palace, he casts one swift look down into the pallid face of Major Axfell, then turns his leaden-hued visage to the man beside him upon the box, a sound akin to a smothered imprecation accompanying the action.

Axfell peers sharply up at the man beside Bridger. "It is you, Saul Temple?" he demands, huskily.

"Yes."

"Where is—"

"Your son is dead—"

"Dead—Saul!"

"Dead, my friend! He was enticed away from Golconda this morning, by members of Bludso's Band, and murdered!"

CHAPTER I. STRANGELY MET.

THE reckless sport was cornered—driven at bay like a hunted beast. Yet there was no sign of flinching. His head was thrown back proudly and defiantly, his broad chest expanded, and in his black eyes was a light very like the angry, lurid glow of smoldering coals.

A full half-second deadly steel tubes stared him straight in the face; but he stood calm and cool, a bitter smile revealing his strong white teeth, his athletic form in bold relief against the wall of gray rock, his left hand hanging carelessly at his side, his right clasp the butt of an elegantly-mounted, but serviceable-looking revolver at full cock and leveled.

In height, he was perhaps a trifle under six feet; his shoulders were broad and shapely; his chest was full and well-rounded. Titanic strength and catlike agility lay in the mold of his arms, trunk and limbs.

Of princely poise was his head, with delicate yet clear-cut features, and long, crisply-curling hair of jetty blackness. From lip and chin swept, respectively, a dainty mustache and imperial. His eyes were large and intensely black; his face was a deep olive tint.

At a glance it was apparent from both attire and bearing that this man at bay was a border sport. He looked it from the crown of his broad white sombrero to the soles of his dusty patent-leather boots.

He was well armed, too, for belted to his waist were a second revolver and a bowie-knife, while across his shoulders hung a Winchester rifle.

And, looking at him, it would instantly occur to all that the dashing sport was completely master of the "tools."

At the feet of the man at bay lay a poncho upon which, apparently, he had been reclining, and a dozen paces distant a clean-limbed mustang, saddled and ready for flight, leisurely cropped the scant mountain herbage.

"Sprised, hain't ye, Perdido?" exclaimed the leader of the armed and desperate-looking group confronting the sport, his coarse tones vibrating with malicious exultation.

"If so, not agreeably," was the cool retort.

"I suppose, Bravo Brice, thet ye an' ther Serpents ov Cimarron aire hyar ter levy toll?"

"Precactly, Perdido—precactly," guffawed the rough, in mock mirth. "All thet kems to our net aire fish; an' yet, we hain't follered yer fer all these miles for plunder alone, Perdido."

"No, I kinder think not," observed the entrapped man, his red lips curling grimly.

"No," Bravo Brice continued. "We knows thet ye hes gold, Perdido Fernandez; but not all yer yaller dust c'u'd 'a' drawed ther Serpents ov Cimarron so far out ov ther way."

The dark sport uttered a soft laugh.

"True!" he cried; "the Serpents ov Cimarron aire es lazy a pack ov thieves an' cut-throats es all New Mexico kin boast!"

"Lazy, yas; but in s'arch ov revenge tireless, Perdido," retorted the Bravo. "Et am yer life we wants wuss than yer money. We hain't fergot thet a week ago ye putt ther Vigilantes ov Barranca ag'in' us, an' thet half our men war killed. We swore then ter hev revenge. W'en we diskivered thet yer was on our trail, we putt up thes hyar leetle job; and, sport, I kalkilate thet yellaire purty nigh cornered."

"Now will ye kindly drop yer gilt-edged toy, or must we stan' an' see ye suffer from a bad case ov lead p'ison?"

And a mad light flamed up in the eyes of the burly desperado.

Perdido laughed carelessly. A close observer would have noticed that his broad breast expanded a trifle, and that his muscles contracted as if for a tigerish leap.

"Tain't jest as comfortable hyar es I c'u'd like ter hev it," he admitted, his black eyes gleaming wickedly; "but don't f'r a holy minute git it inter yer addled brain thet I am goin' ter drop my tools, Bravo Brice."

"Yer view ov the present state ov affairs aire kinder biased—lop-sided. Can't ye see thet this hyar leetle peacemaker p'int straight fer yer cabeza? an' can't ye kalkilate from thet thet ther chances aire thet ef ye try yer riddin' game ye'll trot at my side in the race over ther range?"

"Ther deck hes bin packed ag'in' me in this game ter ther death; but ef ther hands aire all full an' revolvers trumps, *plon!* Perdido Fernandez will swing his keerds fer all they aire wuth!"

Involuntarily Bravo Brice shrunk back a trifle, for there was a menacing ring in the swiftly-uttered words.

At the same instant, with the abruptness of thought, the bold sport, dropping to his knees, with his left hand caught up the poncho and enveloped his head in its folds. Simultaneously, and before the surprised Serpent could lift even a finger, his revolver—its muzzle in what seemed to be a simple tuft of dry grass—cracked once, twice, thrice, in rapid succession, and up from the ground shot a broad sheet of flame, hiding him from view.

In the briefest measurable space of time the sultry air became charged with a peculiar thick white smoke, which completely enshrouded both the hunters and the hunted.

"Perdition! We aire tricked, pards! Fire—fire! an' break fer ther mustang!" cried Bravo Brice, hoarsely, coughing and sneezing, as he rapidly emptied the chambers of his revolvers at the spot where he had last seen Perdido, the sport.

Then, high above the rattling discharge of firearms, a derisive, taunting yell rung out, followed by the rapid clatter of hoofs, and down the narrow valley swept the fleetfooted mustang with Perdido bending low in the saddle.

A howl of wolfish anger escaped the chief of the desperadoes.

"Jump fer ther horses!" he shouted, savagely, as the smoke-cloud lifted until the escaping sport was visible. "Mount an' a'ter ther slip'ry cuss, hot foot! W'ill git 'im yet—ther mustang hes bin hard ridden an' aire no match for our horses!"

And even as he spoke he led the way.

In grim silence the Serpents followed, and a moment later the entire band was mounted and coursing down the valley in swift pursuit of the hated sport.

Far in advance, through the narrow, tortuous length of the fastness, and out from the gathering shadows of the foothills into the broad yellow sunlight of a broad plain thundered Perdido, his face grim and determined.

"We aire gainin', pards!" cried Brice, savagely, as he and his followers left the foothills and flashed across the level of the plain. "Ther powder-trick ov ther derned cuss won't sarve him a cent's wuth! Ther sun aire settin', but afore night comes on we'll finish the sleuth-hound forever. Then, hol' fer fresh fields and greater pastures, whar no more we'll see ther crimson sign ov ther hand an' ther serpent!"

No word of response came from the Serpents of Cimarron; but there was a sharp clicking, as of strong teeth shut viciously together, and their evil eyes flushed madly. With one accord, the long howls of their Mexican spurs were driven yet deeper into the reeking flanks of the jaded horses.

Perdido seemed fully aware of his peril, for he cast frequent glances over his shoulder.

"They are creeping up fast," he at last muttered, for the first time in the chase applying the spur to his mustang. "On. Feetfoot! on for another hour, till night hides us from our foes, when we'll turn and unseen strike back blow for blow."

Carefully he examined his weapons, and from the set, determined expression mantling his dark face, it could be read at a glance that the Serpents of Cimarron had pitted themselves against a man of nerve.

On across the grassy plain swept the spirited mustang; on, until—

Cra k!

The report of a rifle rung out sharply, to be caught up in a thousand snapping, cracking echoes in the distant hills, and the dashing sport, dropping his Winchester, reeled and toppled headlong from the saddle, with the blood trickling in a crimson stream across his forehead.

Uttering a snort of alarm, the well-trained mustang galloped away a few yards, then halted, wheeled and came trotting back to the side of the stricken sport.

Brice and his men, startled, apparently, by the shot, abruptly reined in their prancing steeds, and for a moment sat as motionless as so many graven images, in sharp relief against the golden splendor of the western horizon, looking askance at one another.

"Pards, who fired that shot?" muttered the outlaw chief uneasily.

Then, as if in answer, up from the rank grass of the prairie a hundred yards beyond Perdido arose a man—a short, rather slenderly-built fellow, repulsive in appearance, clad in ragged buckskin, and armed with a repeating rifle.

Slowly, and with a shambling gait, the assassin rifleman strode toward his victim, the rays of the setting sun lighting up with startling effect his hideous face.

"Ther Devil!" and Bravo Brice abruptly wheeled his horse.

"Turn, pards—turn and fly, for it aire Walking Death, ther Leper—ther outcast ov ther plains!" he cried, in suppressed tones. "Ef Perdido, ther sport, yet lives, it aire only ter suffer death through all his life, fer thet fiend in human shape hes marked him fer his prey!"

Obeying, with one accord, the Cimarron brigands spurred swiftly away, followed by a taunting yell from the man who had robbed them of their victim.

Advancing until he was within a dozen paces of the stricken sport, Walking Death started convulsively, then halted, dropping the butt of his rifle to the ground and clasping his hands over the muzzle to support his trembling form.

As revealed by the last rays of the sun, a being more repellent could hardly be conceived.

Apparently a finely-formed man originally, he had fallen a prey to leprosy; and now his form was

shrunk and wasted, his hair gone, and his nose almost eaten away, while his face and neck were swollen to abnormal proportions and thickly covered with scaling bulbous excrescences.

And the large hands clasped over the muzzle of the rifle also eloquently bespoke the ravages of the dread disorder, for joints were missing from several of the long and strangely thick fingers.

Until the sun had dipped behind the horizon and the Serpents of Cimarron were far away, the ghastly wretch stood, weak and trembling, his blue eyes, filled with an expression of keen regret, fixed steadily upon the pallid, bloodstained face of Perdido Fernandez.

Then the leper started and eagerly glided forward, only to halt and glare ahead, as if expecting each moment to note in the sport signs of returning animation.

And his expectations were realized; for, presently, a violent shudder ran through the form of Perdido, who the next instant sprang half erect and glared savagely around.

A fervent exclamation escaped the tongue of Walking Death.

Dashing the trickling blood from his eyes, the wounded sport clapped his hands upon the revolvers in his belt.

"Thet war a coward's shot, Bravo Brice!" he gritted madly, the lurid glow in his dark eyes deepening. "Cuss ye! whar aire ye?—sneaked off like a cowardly coyote? Ef ye want me *bad*, I am hyar, an' game ter ther last!"

"Peace, Perdido!" cried Walking Death, in a voice soft and musical, strangely at variance with his external appearance, as he advanced a trifle. "Bravo Brice and the Serpents of Cimarron have fled. We are alone upon the plain."

The handsome sport started as if shot. A strange, clearly perceptible shiver ran through his stalwart form, and his face grew yet whiter.

"Great God! that voice!" he ejaculated, his tones accentuated with sudden agony, and again dashing the mist of blood from his eyes, he stared at the leper.

"Who aire ye man?" he demanded hoarsely. "Where is the voice that recalls Carlotta Dane an' ther dead past? Speak, wretch! or by heavens! I'll choke ther truth from yer throat!"

And with a wolfish cry he flung himself straight at the prairie outcast.

CHAPTER II.

THE SENTINEL OF THE PLAIN.

PERDIDO'S face expressed disagreeable surprise and fearful expectancy, as well as rage, as he sprang toward Walking Death, the Leper.

"Back, Perdido Fernandez—back!" cried the outcast, in warning tones, his voice wholly changed, as he retreated precipitately. "To approach or touch me is to bring upon yourself a fate ten thousand times more terrible than the grave, for I am Walking Death, the Leper!"

"Hal ye speak ther truth!" exclaimed the sport, abruptly halting, then drawing back in disgust. "I saw ye not, for the blood from this cussed wound hed blinded me!"

"But what do ye hyar—*you*, whose haunts aire in ther mountain fastnesses west ov Cimarron?"

"What do I hyar?" repeated the leper, a hollow, mirthless laugh joining with the words. "Ask ye of the dead my mission, Perdido, for far more apt to tell ye are they than I."

"Suffice it, that where go Bravo Brice and the Serpents of Cimarron, *there* have I work to do."

"As hev I!" gritted the sport involuntarily, the hammers of his weapons half raising under a sudden pressure of his thumbs.

"And red work, too," observed the leper, catching the other's low spoken words.

"How know ye thet?" Perdido demanded suspiciously.

"As I know many things," was the quick reply. "You are not what you seem, Perdido. You are not a Cuban, nor were your curling locks and mustache always of the hue of the raven's wing, nor your skin of olive tint, for you are playing a dual part!"

The sport's black eyes flashed dangerously, and his revolvers swept to a level. He demanded angrily:

"What mean ye, leper?" "Exactly what I say," replied Walking Death, his hollow laugh again jarring forth unpleasantly. "Back, Perdido, and put up your weapons; for, Ishma!ite though I am, with my hand against every man, and the hands of all men against me, yet we two should be friends, for we are striving for a common purpose—vengeance against the Serpents of Cimarron!"

Mechanically, the dark sport returned his revolvers to his belt.

"True—even as a pair ov trays an' plenty of sand beats three aces an' a pair ov weak knees," he muttered.

The prairie outcast continued.

"But hark ye, Perdido—the very air ye breathe is polluted with the stench of my dread disorder. Take warning, and go!"

The sport nodded swift assent. Donning his sombrero and catching up his Winchester, he vaulted lightly into the saddle.

"Ye're right; and I am off, Walking Death—off ter ther gold-camps ov southwestern Colorado, whar go Bravo Brice an' his road-agent band," he said. "But before we part, thar aire one question I would ask."

"Who fired ther shot thet dropped me from ther saddle?"

The leper shuddered, and his eyes sought the ground.

"It was I," he admitted reluctantly.

A mocking laugh escaped Perdido.

"And yet, 'we two sh'ld be friends!' he sneered. Walking Death started as if stung, stepping forward a pace, his hands raised appealingly and his eyes glowing with a strange light.

"You wrong me, Perdido!" he said, his faltering tones betraying emotion. "You were directly between me and the setting sun; in its glare my eyes deceived me into the belief that you were a foe. But that which caused the mistake also rendered my aim defective, so that you escaped with but a scalp-wound."

"And my presence here doubtless saved your life, for when I left the cover of the grass Bravo Brice and his men turned and fled."

"P'rhaps I do owe ye somethin'—anyway, we'll let the matter pass," muttered Perdido, ungraciously. "Ther Serpents c'u'd 'a' run me down, fer my mustang war jaded; true, some ov ther devils w'u'd 'a' bin fixed fer ther last procession, but who w'u'd 'a' mourned a'ter me?"

"Yas, we'll call t'er matter a draw, leper, an' I'll be off, fer my camp to-night must be in yonder foothills. So, now, adieu, an' may yer future be happier than yer past, Senor Walking Death!"

In the tones of the reckless sport was a tinge of bitter mockery.

"Farewell, Perdido, and may luck attend you!" responded the outcast of the prairie, a scarcely noticeable tremor causing his musical tones to vibrate.

Doffing his sombrero, Perdido wheeled, and with a free use of the spur urged his jaded horse toward the distant hills at a furious gallop.

Long and earnestly, with a look of intense pain in his dark eyes, the leprous wretch gazed after the rapidly receding horseman.

"Handsome as ever, despite his complete disguise—handsome, but faithless, and as cold and cruel as the grave," he muttered, turning away, as one in despair, as horse and rider vanished over the crest of a swell in the plain.

"My God! must I longer endure this ceaseless agony? Each time our paths cross I grow weak, and waver in my purpose. Am I longer equal to the terrible task before me, or must I miserably fail?"

"Fail? No! no! I *will* be strong and enduring—*will* avenge my wrongs—*will* live and follow the trail to the bitter end, to wrest from the face of the villain who would rob me and mine of happiness and peace the mask of hypocrisy, expose his guilt and punish him for his dark and deadly work!"

Slowly at first, and low, in accents of bitterest despair, but with voice gradually rising until it rung through the gathering twilight of the prairie with the weird effect of a banshee's wail, spoke the leper, his eyes filling with a strange and terrible glow, each fiber of his wasted form thrilling anew with life and a mad strength.

And his horribly mutilated right hand was lifted to Heaven, as if to invoke the Divine Being to witness the registration of a vow of vengeance!

Fearful in its intensity, the wild outburst was of brief duration.

With the abruptness of "one with a mind diseased," the outcast lapsed into utter quietness. Darting piercing glances hither and thither across the darkening plain, he stood ogre-like for a moment, then placed his fingers upon his lips and uttered a sharp whistle.

Scarcely had the shrill sound died away, when upon the grim silence broke the dull thud of a horse's hoofs, and straight to the side of Walking Death galloped a powerful black steed, closely followed by two gaunt bloodhounds.

"Aha! my dumb friends, you are here, prompt to do your master's bidding, and faithful unto death!" he muttered, his voice womanly in its softness and tenderness, as he caressed the three animals in turn.

Only a moment was he silent, then again he spoke, his tones taking on the acidity of a sharply-uttered command.

"Back, Pluto—back! Be off with you, and bring up Hydrus and Hydrabad."

Whatever the significance of the words, the larger of the sagacious hounds seemed to understand, for with a low whine it crouched down, writhing as if under the lash, then suddenly wheeled and with its quivering muzzle close to the earth darted off along the back trail.

"Now for the trail again, and vengeance!" muttered Walking Death, as the gaunt brute shot beyond sight.

Quickly leashing the remaining hound, the leper, with agility strangely at variance with his previous labored and painful movements, at a bound seated himself in the saddle.

Then off over the plain he rode at a slow pace until the bloodhound had lifted the trail of the Serpents of Cimarron, then coursed swiftly to the eastward, as if bent upon overtaking the road-agent band.

For hours he spurred onward through the darkness, his deep-set eyes glowing strangely—onward, until the dead calm of midnight rested upon the plain, when with startling distinctness, in a hoarse voice, came the challenge:

"Halt! or ye're buzzards' bait!"

"Hollo—hallo!" ejaculated the leper, reining in with an abruptness that sent his horse back upon its haunches. "Who the deuce are *you*, that stops me at this hour in the middle of the prairie?"

"That hain't ther question a'tall," was the swiftly uttered response. "Et aire fer ye ter give an account ov yerself; an' don't ver beat about ther bush nuther, fer lead aire pesky cheap 'round hyar jist now."

"Oho! oho!" cried Walking Death, his voice shrill

and tantalizing, as he brought his knees sharply against the sides of his horse, causing the well-trained animal to sink down in the rank grass. "If you are so infernally anxious to find out just who I am, come and see."

The bold challenge was accepted as promptly as given; for, with a jingle of spurs, the sentinel of the plain rode forward, looming up like a gigantic centaur in the Cimmerian gloom.

Crouching upon the back of his prostrate horse, his dark eyes glowing vividly, Walking Death raised his hand, moving it slowly at first, but with ever-increasing swiftness, in a circle above his head, producing a sharp, sibilant hiss.

Nearer rode the sentry, wholly unconscious of the nature of the peril in his path—nearer, until, when almost beside his crouching foe, the warning hiss reached his hearing, causing him to draw abrupt rein.

With an eerie, blood-chilling screech, the leper sprang erect. At the same instant, his right arm described a sharp, forward sweep, the next moment to be drawn swiftly back.

A yell of terror welled up from the sentry's lips, then died away in a hollow gurgle, as if smothered by the gripe of a giant hand upon his throat.

One fleeting second he sat bolt upright in the saddle, quivering in every fiber, his tongue protruding and his hands tearing desperately at his throat, then reeled and toppled head-first to the earth.

CHAPTER III.

A GHASTLY FIND.

HALTING, just as twilight merged into darkness, beside a narrow stream flowing through a secluded dell back in the foot-hills, Perdido Fernandez wearily flung himself from the saddle and relieved his sadly-jaded mustang of his trappings.

There was a peculiar expression on the face of the handsome sport as he lariatied the animal out to graze; and in the performance of his camp routine, he moved with the slow, methodical manner of one whose mind is fully preoccupied.

At the head of the rock-walled glen, a natural basin of considerable depth had formed in the channel of the brawling stream. After a plunge into its cooling waters, Perdido dressed the scalp-wound made by the leper's bullet, then filled and lit a pipe, and reclining at full length upon the *poncho*, gave himself up to meditation.

His encounter with Walking Death was yet fresh in his mind, and as he recalled each detail of the strange meeting, he shifted and turned uneasily.

"It is deuced singular that the phantom *Fast* persists in rising up in connection with this affair," he mused, half-aloud, his voice freed to a great extent of the peculiar dialect of the plains. "It was precisely three years the fifth day of this month since I heard the voice of sweet Carlotta Dane for the last time; and yet, to-day when Walking Death, the Leper, spoke, I could have sworn the tones were hers."

"Oh! I have it—his voice was the intangible link between the past and the present, for at the time it pierced one through and through, like the thrust of a dull knife, tearing old wounds agape and crowding in upon my dazed brain a flood of bitter recollections."

"A strange, weird being is the leper, and were time less precious I would be tempted to hound him down and wrest from him the grim secret of his life. The Serpents of Cimarron do well to hold him in superstitious horror and dread; for I suspect that he alone of living men knows the true significance of the crimson sign of that band and the serpent, the mystic mark of the insatiate destroyer of the road-agent band."

"But be he the unknown slayer—be he man or devil—I owe him my life. Twice has he crossed my path, rendering me a signal service each time. And yet, I hate and loathe him as I would the Evil One."

And thus communing with himself, Perdido lay until his pipe was exhausted, then wrapped himself in the folds of his *poncho* and with his Winchester for a pillow quickly sunk into a light and dreamless sleep.

The first streak of dawn had scarcely shot athwart the eastern horizon when he was again astir, his dark brow knitted in thought. After a second plunge into the basin, and a frugal meal from the contents of a small bag hanging to his saddle, he saw that his weapons were in good condition, mounted, and just at sunrise rode out of the foothills and across the plain toward the point at which he had encountered Walking Death, the Leper.

Seeking the exact spot where the outcast of the prairies had stood during their brief parley, the sport dismounted and knelt to examine the hard earth.

"The grass is trampled and broken, and that alone is left to show that he stood here," he muttered, a moment later, springing to his feet and biting his lip in vexation.

"By Heaven! loathsome as he is, he so vividly recalls certain events that I am tempted to the belief that Walking Death and Carlotta Dane are one and the same person!"

The look mantling Perdido's dark face as the above words hissed sharply through his set teeth and rigid lips was simply indescribable.

"Ha! what is this?" he ejaculated the next moment. "The marks of horses' hoofs, sharp and clearly defined! Can it be that the Serpents have returned to wreak vengeance upon the outcast for robbing them of their prey?"

His dusky face growing yet darker, his black eyes kindling with a fiery gleam, the sport, grasping his bridle rein with his left hand, with his right whipped a revolver from his belt and darted a searching, suspicious glance over the parched expanse, then turned and with a muttered imprecation bent his gaze upon the trail.

"Yes, a detachment of the road-agents have made a wide detour, so as to approach this spot from the eastward, with the intention of surprising and wiping out the leper," he grunted.

"They must have discovered that his shot was not fatal and that I escaped; and yet, I have seen no sign of their presence upon any trail, nor do I see anywhere indications that a struggle occurred between them and the leper. They came with a force sufficiently strong to tackle us both, too, for there were just six horses in the party."

"On the whole, I don't like the appearance of things. I must keep on my guard; for if the Serpents really returned to slay the leper and learn my fate, I am subject to a disagreeable surprise or an ambush at any moment."

And vaulting lightly into the saddle, Perdido, with a wary eye upon his surroundings, rode eastward along the trail until he had reached the spot where the horse and hounds of Walking Death had lain concealed in the tall grass.

There, with a crisp ejaculation, the sport drew rein and again dismounted, closely examining the hard earth and the broken grass.

"Oho! the outcast was not afoot, as I supposed," he observed. "Here his horse lay concealed, and from this point came the shot that so nearly ended my career."

"Here, too, is the trail of the six Serpents, approaching from the eastward. If the leper yet lives, he is somewhere to the west or north, and between the two factions of Bravo Brice's outlaw band."

"By Heaven! leprous outcast and scourge though he is—be his identity real or assumed—he shall not fall a victim to the red-handed clan while I can keep the saddle or lift a weapon."

"Twice has he stepped between me and death. Now I shall take the trail, to rescue him, if living, to avenge him, if dead."

And hesitating not an instant, Perdido mounted, turned, and spurred along the trail to the point of its convergence with that left by the Serpents of Cimarron the night before, when they fled so precipitately from the dread outcast of the prairie.

Then the sport halted long enough to examine closely the blending of the trails, and to satisfy himself that his conjectures were probably correct.

"This last trail is some hours older than the first," he mused as he prepared to remount. "From this point on I must guard even more closely against an ambush, for now that Bravo Brice and his men know that I am yet alive, they will at once suspect that I am on their trail, and leave no stone unturned in an effort to entrap me."

And, scouring the wide expanse of plain, the reckless sport urged his mustang along at a swift pace, his dark face grim and set, his restless black eyes gleaming ominously.

Dark and bitter, too, were the thoughts crowding in upon the quick brain of Perdido, and anon his keen, white teeth sunk into his nether lip until the blood trickled forth in a slender red stream. At such times his broad breast rose and fell with strong emotion.

For hours he rode onward. The sun had almost reached the meridian, when he suddenly drew rein and dismounted, just beyond rifle-shot of a small motte through which the trail led.

"If in wait, the devils are there!" he grunted, looking closely to his weapons. "In such case, it will be no easy matter to reach the place undetected. And at best it is a risky proceeding, for the odds are all against a man's getting back here with a whole hide."

"But the play must be made, or the other side will jump in and capture the winning trick. I will follow the trail right into the grove, for that is the course they will least expect me to take, if they are there and have discovered my approach."

And sinking down into the rank grass, Perdido crept swiftly forward upon all-fours, reaching the edge of the motte in an incredibly short time.

The silence of death brooded over the timber clump—a stillness eloquent of danger and death in the lone solitude.

The motte was almost free of undergrowth, the greater part of the space among the dwarfed trees being carpeted with a luxuriant growth of grass.

No sign of life was visible; but on every side were indications that the grove had the night before been the camping-place of the Serpents of Cimarron, for the grass was trampled and crushed, and in many places cropped short by the horses of the outlaw band, while under the trees was yet standing a wickiup, or brush shelter.

At sight of this last object, a puzzled expression flitted over the dark face of Perdido.

"Humph!" he exclaimed, "has Bravo Brice grown delicate of late, and dainty, or has some hapless woman fallen into his villainous clutches?"

"Great God! dolt that I am! The wickiup proves that my suspicions were correct—that Walking Death, the Leper, is none other than the lost Carlotta Dane, in deep disguise; and she is now a captive in the hands of her most deadly foes, Bravo Brice and his men, the paid minions of Harold Chetwynd, the arch-conspirator!"

As the swiftly enunciated words fell from the tongue of Perdido, he staggered rather than stepped from the friendly shelter of the tree behind which he had been ensconced. For a moment he reeled blindly; then his long, tapering fingers fastened in a firm gripe around the polished butts of his revolvers, and, apparently oblivious to all sense of fear, with a series of eager, tigerish leaps he reached the side of the wickiup.

Burning with eagerness though he was, to thrust aside the brush and learn the secret of the wickiup, if secret it possessed, Perdido felt a strange hesi-

tancy, a nervous dread, stealing over him and holding him in check.

But he was not the man to falter in a purpose once formed, even though almost certain death hinged upon its execution.

The dashing sport was a strange character—such a one that is but seldom encountered—in many ways an odd genius, in some a remarkable one; in the parlance of the "wild and woolly West," "a game-cock, with plenty of crow and lots of gall, and a crow chock-full of sand."

Conquering the feelings that held him in abeyance, he raised his foot and sent it crashing through the side of the frail shelter.

With a quick glance around, the sport dropped to his knees and peered through the aperture into the wickiup.

Instantly a ghastly pallor overspread his face, and he sprang erect, with the exclamation:

"By heavens! the wickiup has an occupant, and that occupant is a corpse!"

CHAPTER IV.

CACTUS BURR, ESQUIRE, OF HARD LUCK.

THAT Perdido Fernandez, the reckless sport, was terribly agitated by the discovery he had just made was plainly evident, for the exclamation above recorded came from his lips in low, intense accents, while his aspect was that of a man brought abruptly face to face with an object of especial and chilling horror.

"Yes, the wickiup has an occupant, and that occupant is a corpse," he mechanically repeated, as he stared fixedly through the hole in the side of the brush shelter. "And that corpse bears the mark of the Destroyer!"

"Great God! will his red work never cease?"

Conquering his agitation, Perdido knelt and gazed steadily through the aperture at the face of the corpse—at the Destroyer's mark, a serpent writhing in the iron grasp of a gauntleted hand, impressed in blood-red upon the waxen forehead.

"He was a Serpent of Cimarron, and so deserved his fate," uttered the sport, suddenly springing to his feet and beginning a restless walk to and fro.

"I will call up Fleetfoot, and here in this grove rest him an hour, while I put the dead outlaw beneath the sod. For I must bury him, Serpent though he was. In life, we were foes; but now, death has stepped in, and enmity between us has ceased."

Summoning the well-trained animal with a peculiar call, Perdido lariatied it in the most luxuriant of the grass, then again turned to the wickiup.

Quickly tearing away the end of the shelter, he grasped the dead outlaw by the shoulders and drew him forth.

A stalwart man, gray and grizzled, had been the Serpent—full six feet in height, broad-shouldered, and of wondrous muscular development. A glance at his distorted face, protruding eyes and lolling tongue showed that his end had been most terrible.

There were no bloodstains—no marks of violence on his person; but, infinitely more startling, around his hairy throat ran a slender, bluish line—the mark of a strangler's cord!

With a shiver of disgust, Perdido drew away. Sinking upon his knees, he with his bowie-knife began the task of scooping out a shallow grave. When he had ended, naught but a mound of fresh earth was left to mark the grim tragedy of the motte.

Then, after a rigid but fruitless search of the interior of the wickiup, the sport again mounted and with a hard-set face spurred away to the northward—the trail running almost at right angles with its former course.

All through the long afternoon—in the fierce glare of the sun, he rode, never for an instant faltering, though he and his steed each betrayed signs of weariness.

There was yet an hour of sunlight when he reached a narrow pass in the foothills, through which the trail ran.

"Somewhere back in these hills Bravo Brice and his men are encamped for the night," he muttered, halting. "Their horses must be terribly jaded, for the trail has been gradually freshening until now it is but little more than an hour old."

"I must find cover for Fleetfoot, then creep forward and get the bearings of the outlaw camp, for I am determined to learn before the night is gone if my suspicions are correct—if Carlotta Dane is alive and by some strange fatality a captive in the hands of her foes."

Only a moment Perdido hesitated, then pushed boldly yet cautiously into the pass.

A few minutes sufficed to discover the shelter desired—a deep and narrow ravine cutting into the western side of the gloomy pass.

Two hundred yards up the ravine the sport dismounted and tethered the mustang, then hurried back and carefully obliterated his trail.

That precautionary measure completed, he at once scaled the precipitous wall of the passage to the sparsely-wooded heights, then took his bearings and pushed forward, laying his course parallel to that of the trail in the depths below.

The way was rough and tortuous—even more so than the sport had suspected. Huge rocks and boulders, and great thickets of undergrowth, so blocked the path at times, that he was tempted to descend to the pass and push boldly and rapidly along the trail, trusting to luck as much as to such care as could be exercised to avoid discovery by the Serpent of Cimarron.

Then, too, the long, cool shadows of approaching night were creeping steadily up the face of the acclivity, warning the bold adventurer that he had remaining but little time in which to carry out his project—in which to meet and overcome the obstacles in his path.

And yet, he disliked to abandon his first formed plan, for he urgently desired to gain a point whence he could look down directly into the camp of his foes.

"They can't be far up the pass," he muttered, as he picked his way through one of the thickets; "and while this is a rough road to travel, I prefer its scratches and bruises, with its secrecy, to the smoother way of the pass and the risk of discovery."

"Hello! hello! Now, what in the world can this mean?"

The sport had struggled through the intricacies of the thicket, and now stood in a comparatively open space.

His face bore a startled look, and his attitude as well as his words betrayed intense surprise; and justly, too, for directly before him, upon a stake driven into the hard earth, floated a white handkerchief—a dainty, filmy affair, the property of a member of the gentler sex, and fresh and fragrant with the odor of white roses!

"What mystery is this?" continued Perdido, clinching his hands and peering about as if he would pierce every nook and cranny of the surrounding jungle. "Can this be some devilish trap? That bit of lace was not placed there without a purpose."

A moment of hesitancy; then, as if satisfied that he was alone upon the height, he strode forward and deliberately plucked the handkerchief from its resting-place.

As he shook out its delicate folds, a bit of crumpled white paper dropped to the ground.

"White roses!" uttered the sport, involuntarily, detecting the faint perfume as he stooped to secure the paper. "Carlotta Dane was passionately fond of that flower—a strange coincidence, truly. Good heavens! Everything tends to confirm my suspicions. Ay, here is proof, almost, that she is alive and in the hands of the merciless Serpents of Cimarron, for here upon the corner of this handkerchief are her initials, 'C. D.'"

The words burst forth in low, intense tones, vibrating with various emotions. Half-crouching, his face growing white and drawn, he stared with glowing, burning eyes at the letters worked in the bit of lace.

For the moment, he seemed totally oblivious of his surroundings, and of the fact that at any instant a bullet from some lurking member of the outlaw band might throw him forever off the trail.

At length, he thrust the handkerchief into a pocket of his loose velvet jacket, and slowly smoothed out the folds of the paper.

Then, again, as his eyes swept over the paper, he uttered a low, stifled cry of surprise, for there, traced in firm, round characters, in pencil, were the words:

"PERDIDO FERNANDEZ:—If you value your life, turn your back to this trail, and leave the Serpents of Cimarron and their unknown chief to their work of pillage and plunder, for border justice will overtake them. Death, now, if, unheeding this, you continue. "WALKING DEATH, THE LEPER."

Uttering a harsh exclamation, partaking strongly of the nature of the snarl of an enraged tiger, the sport flung aside the warning missive and ground it to shreds beneath his booted heel.

"Curse him! curse him for a meddling fool!" he cried madly, his hands dropping intuitively upon the butts of his ready revolvers. "Not while so much as a drop of blood remains to animate my body will I falter. Until the end is reached I will not leave the trail!"

And striding quickly across the open space, he hurried onward, his face dark and lowering, and his black eyes gleaming fiercely.

His blood seemed to surge through his veins with the consuming heat of molten metal; and that his brain was crowded with conflicting thoughts was, at a glance, apparent.

"How came the handkerchief in the hands of that leprous outcast?" he grunted aloud, the words slipping through his set teeth with a peculiarly disagreeable hiss. "Did he pick it up on the trail we both are following, or did it come into his possession by other means?"

"Wal, pilgrim, I can't answer that thar riddle!" interrupted a voice, in which there was just a suspicion of mockery; "but ye bet yer old patent-leathers ye'd better—"

"Whoa, thar! han's up an' empty, ye durned cantankerous critter, or ye'll wake up in kingdom-come 'ith a shaft bored plum' center thro' yer cabeza!"

"Now ye do heer me rustle—me, Cactus Burr, Esquire, ov Hard Luck!"

In cool, crisp, yet measured accents came the words, emphasized by the sharp click-click of a revolver suddenly swung to a level, as forth from the shelter of a large bowlder directly into the path of Perdido, the sport, slipped a most remarkable-looking personage.

A man of uncertain age, of slender, well-knit form, rather under the medium in height, and clad in broadcloth of fine texture and fashionable cut, with immaculate linen, a silk hat and highly-polished boots.

His head was small, and of habitually defiant poise, crowned with curling iron-gray locks reaching to his shoulders; and his face, as fresh and ruddy in hue as a schoolboy's, was of a strong and decided mold, indisputably handsome, and lit up by a pair of large, dark-blue eyes, cold, clear and flashing.

In his shirt-front sparkled a diamond of rare size and brilliancy.

Perdido, inwardly foaming and raging at having stalked blindly into the jaws of what might prove a death-trap, but outwardly calm and nonchalant,

quietly, but with evident reluctance lifted his hands from the butts of the revolvers he had been about to draw and flung them up, palms outward and empty.

"Ye hev called; I show my hand. Now what?" he icily enunciated.

"That depends, gentle critter, that depends," softly cooed the gentleman who had so abruptly introduced himself as Cactus Burr, Esquire, of Hard Luck, as, keeping the muzzle of his "six" on a line with the head of the entrapped sport, he with his left hand drew from his pockets a silk handkerchief and spread it upon a projection of the boulder, preparatory to seating himself.

"Depends—upon what?" angrily gritted Perdido, as his captor sunk languidly upon the improvised seat.

A strange smile flitted across the handsome face of Cactus Burr, Esquire.

"Wal, now ye hev me," he frankly admitted. "Mebbe upon nothin' a' tall, fer ye look like a white man; an' ef ye aire sech, thar is no bone ov contention betwixt ye an' me."

"But, say, stranger, ye're a heap too mercurial fer yer own peace an' quiet—ye're goin' ter slip a cog in yer mental gear some of these hyar fine days an' salivate yerself."

The sport uttered an exclamation of impatience and disgust.

"Confine yerself ter business," he growled. "Ther sun aire 'most out ov sight, an' I hev work ter do afore night."

Cactus Burr, Esquire, nodded shortly, and the half-mocking expression fled from his face, to be instantly replaced by a look of grim determination.

Arising from the boulder, he advanced a pace, his brilliant blue eyes flaming with a peculiar lurid light, and, over his leveled revolver, in a hard, cold voice demanded:

"Stranger, do ye belong ter ther outfit in camp below, just around ther bend in ther pass?"

"Speak quick an' tell ther truth, fer by ther Lord ov Israel! yer life depends upon yer answer!"

CHAPTER V.

A WEIRD RESCUE.

At the query, Perdido uttered a sneering laugh. "I sh'd think ye'd know 'thout askin'," he retorted bitterly.

A slight frown gathered on the smooth brow of the man in broadcloth, and his tapering fore-finger played menacingly on the trigger of his leveled weapon.

"Ye mean by thet—"
"Jest w'at ye kin make out of it," broke in Perdido. "Stiffen yer knees an' hump yer back inter an interrogation p'int—then uncurl yerself fer yer pains. Ye hold ther drop, an' so kin help yerself ter w'at leetle dust I've got, mebbe, but who an' w'at I am aire my own affair—not yours, ye thievin' shark!"

The sport from Hard Luck bowed with icy-coldness.

"I hev no wish ter pry inter *your* affairs," he protested, his eyes glowing strangely. "I simply wish ter know if I am ter regard ye as a friend or a foe? Under-stand, time is as precious with me as with *you*. For ther last time—do ye travel with the outfit below?"

There was a deadly threat in the words and the bearing of Cactus Burr—the hammer of his revolver fairly trembling in the balance, requiring but a hair's weight to hurl death's leaden messenger through the brain of the reckless sport; yet the lips of the latter remained silent, curling slightly with a cold but significant smile.

For a moment the ominous quiet held sway; then again over the face of the man from Hard Luck swept a change of expression, as startling as sudden.

All trace of anger and sternness vanished, as under a magician's wand; the ruddy, boyish face clothed itself in a winning smile, and the deep-blue eyes twinkled roguishly.

"Sport, ye're a dandy ov ther jimmiest kind ov ther James order," he cried, deftly lowering the hammer of his revolver and returning the weapon to its pocket. "Will ye shake? Aire we friends?"

"Not ef ther court knows herself—an' I kalkilate she does," uttered Perdido gruffly, as he clapped his hands upon the butts of his weapons. "I hain't ther style ov galoot w'at crosses palms with a thievin' shark who hes backed water before a little show ov sound."

"Now, ef ye hev an ounce ov grit in yer p'izen karcass, draw an' defend yerself, for one of us must die. D'ye heer?"

Scorning to take any advantage of the man in broadcloth, Perdido had refrained from drawing his weapons, though his hands rested lightly upon them in such a way that it would be utterly impossible for his opponent to again catch the "drop."

T at the dark-faced sport was thoroughly earnest in his determination to precipitate a death-struggle, however, was apparent at a glance. The veins stood out like whipcord on his dusky forehead; hard lines had appeared around his mouth, and the peculiar reddish sparkle of his black eyes betrayed a rage born of deep-rooted hatred.

"Yes, you or I must die ri ht hyar," he continued, his fiery gaze never for an instant leaving the gradually widening blue eyes of Cactus Burr. "An' ye know why it is so—thet ther outfit in camp below aire my deadliest foes; thet ye aire no more Cactus Burr, of Hard Luck, than ye aire the man in ther moon; thet ye aire the one man in all ther world whom I have cause ter hate most—Harold Chetwynd, alias Captain Redblade, chief of ther road-agents known as ther Serpents ov Cimarron!"

His brilliant blue eyes opened to their fullest extent,

his face the picture of astonishment—real or mock—his red lips pursed into a knot, Cactus Burr, Esquire, stood like a graven image until the bitter enunciations of Perdido had ceased, then gave vent to his pent-up feelings in a keen, penetrating whistle.

"Am I awake or dreamin'? Aire ther cuss a mad-man or a fool?" he exclaimed, his voice just audible, as he wearily resumed his seat upon the handkerchief.

The next instant, ere the hot words trembling upon the lips of Perdido Fernandez could find utterance, as if in answer to the sharp whistle of the man in broadcloth, six men, led by Bravo Brice, broke from the cover of the surrounding jungle and with a swift rush closed in upon the dark-faced sport.

Taken completely by surprise by the skillfully planned and adroitly executed maneuver, Perdido stood irresolute for a single instant, then, just as the Serpents threw themselves upon him, jerked a revolver from his belt, flung up his hand and fired three shots in swift succession straight at the smiling face of the man from Hard Luck.

"Take thet—an' thet—an' thet, ye cringin', slimy cuss!" he gritted savagely, as he emptied the chambers of his weapon. "Cuss ye! ye played yer game 'ith a cunnin' hand—an' *lost*!"

The last word was marked with a high degree of fierce exultation, for at the last crack of the revolver, Cactus Burr, Esquire, had thrown up his hands and with a hoarse cry toppled backward over the projection of the great boulder.

Writhing desperately in the grasp of the road-agents, disarmed before he could turn his ready weapons against them, Perdido was quickly overpowered and securely bound. The noosed end of a lariat was then thrown over his head and drawn tightly around his neck.

"Hyar, you, Blunt Bill an' Sweetsie Smith, an' you, Poker Pete, grab a holt ov this hyar rope an' tow ther critter down ter camp," cried Bravo Brice, dealing Perdido a sharp blow across the face. "Ther rest ov us 'il foller arter we've looked about him," with a significant nod toward the boulder behind which Cactus Burr, Esquire, was supposed to be lying cold in death.

"An' treat ther galumphin' critter gently, Bill, fer his feelin's aire easy hurted," added one of the remaining trio, as Blunt Bill and his companions started down the steep with Perdido.

The devilish suggestion embodied in the carelessly uttered words was not lost upon the ruffian as the captive sport soon learned to his cost.

Twilight was fast mantling the face of the declivity and steadily multiplying the difficulties to be encountered in making the descent. Blunt Bill with the end of the lariat wound around his right wrist, led the way, followed by Perdido, while Sweetsie Smith and Poker Pete brought up the rear.

The last named ruffians had stopped by the way long enough to secure heavy, thorny cudgels, with which they frequently belabored the captive sport, interlarding their blows with foul and bitter invectives.

Utterly helpless, half-choked by the savage jerks and pulls of Blunt Bill's strong arm, bruised and bleeding from the merciless blows of the thorny clubs, Perdido staggered blindly along the rough and narrow trail, his white teeth shut firmly together, his half-closed eyes glaring balefully with intense, unutterable rage.

Not the slightest reply did he vouchsafe the mocking taunts and jeers of his brutal captors; but every fiber of his form quivered in mute protest against the outrageous treatment he was being subjected to, and man ally he registered a vow of vengeance against the trio, death to one and all, if he escaped!

The distance to the bottom of the pass was not greater than three hundred yards, yet so toilsome was the way that the better part of an hour was consumed in descending. That point reached, Blunt Bill and his party pushed up the pass with increased rapidity, toward the camp spoken of by Cactus Burr.

Between the lofty walls everything was enshrouded in Cimmerian gloom. Perdido tugged savagely at the pinions confining his wrists; he felt that, once free of them, his escape would be assured; but they had been knotted with a cunning hand and resisted his stoutest efforts.

On through the pass stalked the four men, the phantom outlines of the stalwart form of each barely visible to the other members of the group; on, until, rounding an abrupt bend in the rocky wall, they came in view of a small camp-fire a hundred yards ahead.

At the same instant, a sibilant hiss sounded through the brooding silence. A singular swishing noise, ending with a dull thud, followed, and Blunt Bill sunk down, quivering in the throes of death.

Scarcely had the form of the outlaw touched the earth, when a garish blue light emanating from some unseen source, flared up, dispelling the darkness for yards around, and almost blinding Perdido, and his two tormentors, Sweetsie Smith and Poker Pete.

Then up from the earth beside the lifeless form of the stricken Serpent arose a ghastly skeleton. With a peculiarly dancing, jerking motion, the horrible thing strode forward, each step being accompanied with the rattle of bones and the clanking of a chain.

For a moment the two road-agents stood and stared at the grisly object, with starting eyeballs, then turned, dropped their drawn revolvers, and with short, gasping cries of alarm fled down the pass as if pursued by a thousand demons.

Perdido Fernandez remained as if rooted to the spot, powerless to move hand or foot.

As suddenly, almost, as it had flared up, the un-

earthly light died out, and the skeleton form disappeared. Then, under cover of the darkness—intensified and filled with a weird horror by the strange occurrence—a strong hand was placed upon the shoulder of the dazed sport. A moment it rested there, until the noosed lariat had been lifted from his neck, then slipped deftly down his arm to the pinions confining his wrists. Under the keen edge of a knife the thongs parted, and Perdido was free, with a belt of arms in his hands!

"Go, and at once," exclaimed the mysterious rescuer, in a low and hollow voice. "The camp yonder is astrir, and in your present condition you cannot meet your foes. You will find your horse at the end of the pass."

Strangely weak and trembling, the sport turned and without a word strode rapidly away, urged on by the shouts and yells of the aroused and alarmed camp.

For fully an hour he hurried along, his hands resting upon the butts of the revolvers provided by his strange deliverer, momentarily expecting to encounter the two Serpents known as Sweetsie Smith and Poker Pete.

The rapid walk through the cool, damp pass went far to allay his feverish condition, and all traces of his recent alarm disappeared.

Arrived at the edge of the plain, he halted and peered keenly around in the dim light of the stars.

A few yards distant was a horse, moving restlessly to and fro, and as the sport espied the animal his lips parted and he muttered:

"It is Fleetfoot. Again do I owe my life to Walking Death, the Leper, for this is his work and his alone."

"Now, I will heed his warning and leave the trail of the Serpents of Cimarron; for, wounded as I am, it would be foolhardiness to attempt to cope with them."

"I will hasten on to the chain of mining-camps they are planning to work, and there lie in wait to accomplish their destruction."

And moving forward, Perdido caught the bridle-rein, gently stroked the neck of the black steed a moment, then placed his foot in the stirrup ready for mounting.

At exactly the same instant, a similar performance was being gone through with on the opposite side of the horse, by a tall, gaunt, evil-looking road-agent.

The two men arose in the stirrups simultaneously, each in blissful ignorance of the other's presence until their heads collided with a force that brought to the eyes of each a myriad of twinkling, darting stars.

Reeling blindly for a moment, each rallied and grasped the saddle with fierce tenacity, then stared at the other through the darkness with savage intentness.

The recognition was mutual.

"Poker Pete! by ther Rockies!" crisply ejaculated Perdido, whipping a revolver from his belt.

"Yas, ye cussed hoss-thief! it's Poker Pete!" retorted the outlaw, following the sport's example. "Now, w'ot aire ye goin' ter do about it?"

"Kill ye!" was the grim response, as back to the mind of the sport flashed a recollection of the brutal treatment he had endured at the hands of the man before him.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FACE BEHIND THE MASK.

And then, there on the plain, in the black shadows of the foot-hills began the strangest struggle in the remarkable career of the reckless sport.

It was man against man; and, aside from physical conditions, the odds were even. Equally surprised by the sudden encounter, each with his foot in a stirrup, his left hand grasping the saddle, his right the butt of a heavy revolver, to whom the victory would fall was a question.

Under the presence of the hated outlaw, Perdido felt all weakness and pain vanish. His blood tingled with fierce heat. Every fiber seemed to throb with new life and strength.

"Yas, Poker Pete, I'm goin' ter hev yer life!" he swiftly enunciated, as his revolver swept up to a level with the face of his foe. "I swore it with each blow ye guv me a bit ago. *Now die!*"

There had been no cessation of action upon the part of the sport as he uttered the above words. The muzzle of his revolver stared the outlaw full between the eyes, his long index finger pressing sharply against the trigger; and as the intense, deadly strains of his voice abruptly ceased, a blinding red flash followed, lighting up for an instant the face of each, as a heavy dual report crashed out, sending a thousand echoes ringing up the yawning pass.

Then came a wild commotion, in which were blended the plunging and snorting of the alarmed horse, the sound of heavy blows and deep groans and fierce curses.

"Dern ye, fer a—mean cuss!" panted a harsh voice recognizable as that of Poker Pete. "Ye thort yer play t—on me then, didn't—ye? Two—kin han'le keards in—thet game, ye mis'abul—hoss—*Ow!*"

The interjection came in the shape of an inarticulate cry of agony—just such a sound as the thrust of a keen knife would wring from the lips of a man. The bullets from the revolvers had not been the means of injury to either of the desperate combatants, although fired at such murderously close range that the burning powder had left its mark upon the eyebrows and mustaches of both. Each had been prepared for a shot from his antagonist. Just as Perdido pressed trigger, his weapon was knocked from his hand by the swiftly ascending barrel of the outlaw's revolver—both "tools" exploding in mid-air, directly above and between the heads of the two men, then falling to the ground. Thus disarmed, they clinched across the saddle, each using his head

with brutal force as a battering-ram to dash into the other's face, and startling the frightened horse at a mad gallop directly up the pass. In this emergency Perdido had succeeded in drawing his knife, and with a downward stroke driven it deep into the outlaw's shoulder.

A snarling, raging cry from Poker Pete succeeded the gasp of pain, and, careening wildly as the black steed thundered on, he clawed savagely at the face and throat of his foe, finally enmeshing his fingers deep in the long black hair of the gamely struggling sport, and jerking forward the dark face until it presented a fair and open mark for his own thick skull.

"Satan take ye an' yer knife, Perdido Fernandez!" he screamed, mad with the excruciating torture of the long blade set firmly in the bones of his shoulder—too firmly to be withdrawn by the sport. "Take et—take et! Et's yer gruel, ef it aire wu'ss nur burn-in' brimstun!"

Warned by the savage clutch in his hair, that his face was in danger of being battered out of all semblance of anything human with the bullet head of Poker Pete, the sport, with a deft movement fastened the long, supple fingers of his right hand in a relentless gripe upon the throttle of the outlaw, thus checkmating most effectually the latter's devilish purpose.

"Sizzle gently, ye meat fer devil's broth!" raspingly uttered Perdido, as the clinched hands of the maddened and thoroughly desperate outlaw pulled and tugged at his long locks. "Fer each ha'r I'll hev a drop ov yer heart's blood!"

A retort of an equally lurid character was trembling upon the quivering lips of Poker Pete; but, ere he could give it articulation, a deafening outburst of yells and whoops rung through the confines of the narrow pass, and the horse, shivering in every limb, shied sharply, and stopped in the midst of a glare of light shed by a half-score of flaming torches!

Bold, stout of heart, though he was, Perdido was conscious of a sense of almost utter dismay as a swift glance at the surrounding faces forced him to a realization of the bitter fact that he was at last completely at the mercy of the lawless Serpents of Cimarron!

But, bad as he knew his predicament to be, the dashing sport was not the man to yield without a struggle.

After that first wild outburst upon the part of the road-agents a moment of silence, broken only by an occasional snort of alarm from the black mustang, ensued, and both Perdido and Poker Pete, neither for an instant relaxing his hold upon the other, scanned, so far as possible, the visages brought into prominence by the light of the flickering torches.

"A highly tragic repetition of the Kilkenny cats' affair, truly!" sneered a cold, clear voice, from the inner ranks of the Serpents.

At the words, a palpable change swept over the bloody face of Perdido, and with strange precision his burning black eyes instantly singled out the speaker.

A small man, compared to his brawny fellows; firmly and compactly built, narrow across the shoulders perhaps, but full and unusually well developed as to chest; arms and legs of perfect form, and hands and feet small and shapely.

His clothing was of serviceable gray corduroy, the loose jacket unbuttoned, revealing a ruffled shirt front of snowy whiteness, in the center of which blazed and glittered a costly diamond. Knotted high about his throat was a fancy silk kerchief. His long nut-brown hair was covered by a white sombrero, the crown encircled with the stuffed skin of a prairie rattler, the head and tail lapping in front and held in place by a small red dagger!

Of his face, nothing could be seen, for from brow to chin swept the folds of a soft silken mask, a dead black in color.

Through the eyelets in the facial shield gleamed a pair of large dark orbs.

All this, the sport noted at a single, sweeping glance, and it required no further information to apprise him of the fact that the sneering speaker was no less a personage than the redoubtable Captain Redblade, chief of the Serpents!

Then the eyes of the two men met—those of the sport blazing with hate, the chief's expressive of contempt more than aught else.

"Oho! oho!" cried the latter, with just the slightest glow of increased interest. "It is that meddling Free Lance, Perdido Fernandez; and our worthy Poker Pete is the oak bough by which the flowing locks of the modern Absalom have come to grief!"

The voice of the road-agent chief served to break the semblance of a truce between the two half-mounted foes, for they at once renewed the mad struggle the bony, clawish fingers of Poker Pete gouging deep into the scalp of the cornered sport, the latter's relentless grip in turn shutting down on the hairy throat of the outlaw with such tenacity as almost to choke off his power of utterance.

Then followed a surging forward on the part of the Serpents, as though to interfere and bring the brutal combat to a close; but if such was their design, it was not to be carried into effect, for Captain Redblade's hands dropped swiftly to the gleaming gold butts of the revolvers in his silken girdle, and his voice clear and metallic, he cried:

"Hold! Let no one attempt to interfere, for it is a fair fight, man against man!"

"If Poker Pete slays the sport, well and good; if the sport kills Pete, so much the better, for the lazy loafer isn't worth his feed—he's a nuisance of the first water. If he affords us a few minutes' amusement now, it'll be more than he ever did for the band before!"

Bold words, truly, and strange, in the face of the fact that Poker Pete had long been held up as a paragon of virtue and valor—as virtue and valor go in an outlaw camp!

Almost before the chief had ceased, angry mutterings and incoherent expressions of dissatisfaction began to arise on all sides, accompanied with desultory threats to do this and to do that—threats which might go for much or for little, according to the caliber of the man who would chance the initiative in an attempt to carry them into execution.

A steely glitter appeared in the dark eyes of Captain Redblade as the full portent of the rebellious mutterings flashed upon him; but there was no change in his easy, careless attitude, save that his slender white hands seemed to close just a thought more firmly around the gold-bound butts of his weapons.

"Et's a durned shame, pards—that's w'at et aire!" gratingly uttered a strained voice, easily recognized by the Serpents as that of Poker Pete's bosom friend and colleague, Sweetsie Smith. "Cuss et all! ef that dark-faced critter hain't fanged an' made ter bite et off short, Pete's fixed fer saltin'! Squar' deal! Wal, I sh'u'd cackle t'other way! Ther sport's hol'in' ther age, an' puttin' in his biggest licks ter raise Pete right out ov ther game! Deal yerselves a han', say I, an' swi'g hard ter bu'st ther snap!"

These hurried words brought matters to a focus, for there was an instant massing of men immediately behind Smith, all with weapons drawn, and eager to hurl themselves forward and wrest from the sport the terrible victory that seemed within his grasp.

Then—a lithe form flashed through the murky light, and Captain Redblade, his back almost against the strangely-burdened mustang, his eyes glowing redly, his revolvers leveled, with the hammers fairly on a balance, sturdily faced the faction of malcontents, and in a shrill, incisive voice warned them back, crying:

"Stop, gents, right where you are! Don't forget that yours truly is chief here, and that I shall run this funeral to suit myself. I'd hate to have it to do, but the first kicker who tries to jump traces'll wake up with a mineral shaft in his system! You hear me! You know me!"

Not louder than was necessary, wholly devoid of rant or bluster, charged with deadly earnestness, and in a tone that spoke volumes in the way of determination, the words fell with weighty force upon the outlaws, sending them back in a cluster around their would-be leader, Sweetsie Smith.

Baffled for the moment, that worthy entered into a hurried whispered consultation with those of the serpents nearest him.

Meanwhile, under guise of continuing the struggle with Poker Pete, Perdido was preparing to make a bold stroke for liberty—and revenge!

His teeth hard-set to repress even the slightest groan at the excruciating pain produced by Poker Pete's tugging, twitching gripe in his hair, his eyes half-closed and gleaming with a crafty light, his long fingers shut mercilessly on the throttle of the fast-weakening outlaw, listening covertly but keenly to the stormy passage between Captain Redblade and his men, the sport, exercising due care that Poker Pete should not discover the move, slyly worked his left hand down toward the remaining revolver-butt protruding from his belt.

A fine tool, almost forgotten in the intensity of the strange struggle—six chambers, each with a leaden messenger peeping forth, ready at the will of its master to snuff out the light of human life.

At the very instant Perdido's hand closed around the weapon, Poker Pete intuitively shot a swift glance downward, discovering the action and instantly comprehending its full import.

Desperate before, doubly desperate now, that death swift and sure seemed to stare him in the face, the outlaw, his empurpled visage paling even under the grasp of the iron hand at his throat, loosed his hold on the long locks of the sport, with a violent twist of his head wrenched himself free, and at the risk of broken neck dropped backward to the ground, uttering as he fell, in harsh, gasping tones, the warning:

"Look out, pards! look out! Ther cuss is heeled, devil br'ile 'im!"

"Yes, gents, heeled an' ready fer a leetle healthy blood-lettin'!" quickly added Perdido, his eyes emitting a vivid, mocking glare, as, seating himself firmly in the saddle, he leveled his revolver at full cock.

Warned by Poker Pete's gasping cry, Captain Redblade wheeled sharply around, his hands thrown up and back until the muzzle of his weapons almost rested upon his shoulders, ready to be flung forward for a quick and deadly snap-shot.

Too late! A sardonic laugh from the sport, a flash, a report, and the chief of the road-agents spun blindly 'round and 'round, then dropped in an inert heap.

And as he fell, the black mask fluttered up from his face, exposing for a single instant, to the keen eyes of Perdido, the strong, clear-cut features of Cactus Burr, Esquire, of Hard Luck!

All this, from the moment the frightened and doubly-burdened mustang came to a halt in the Serpents' midst until the fall of the chief, in the merest fraction of the time it takes to tell it.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SEVERED LARIAT.

"He's slayed ther chief!" gratingly uttered Sweetsie Smith, his red-bearded face aflame with rage, as Captain Redblade sunk down. "Didn't I know et was a-comin' an' try ter stop et by slappin' brakes on ther dirty cuss?" he howled, his voice

taking on a squealing sound from the very intensity of his pent-up fury. "Say, you—"

The heavy detonation of a revolver filled the hiatus, and Sweetsie Smith dropped his weapon and clapped both hands to his shaggy head.

"Ye aire marked, gentle laddy-buck—only marked!" cried Perdido mockingly, as he wheeled the mustang to speed down the pass. "when next we meet—"

A dark coil sped hissing over the heads of the outlaws, settling finally around the body of the sport and pinioning his arms to his sides. Which is hyar an' now!" broke in a harsh and sneering voice, as, keeping the lariat taut, Bravo Brice worked his way forward. "Reckon ye'd most forgot thar wus sich a pussones me, critter! Didn't count on me chippin' in and scoopin' ther pot! But all ther same, I know'd from ther fu'st that I were goin' ter do ye, even ef I didn't risk sp'illin' my game a-talkin'!"

"Now, s'pose ye climb down out ov that saddle, fore a few inches ov hungry steel or spelters ov lead gets a chainece ter help ye along!"

His mocking words to Sweetsie Smith frozen on his lips, Perdido made a fruitless effort to throw off the tightening coil. Wholly unexpected, coming at a moment when the way seemed open for escape, the sudden turn of affairs dazed him, rendered him almost incapable of thought or action. Ragged nearly from the saddle by Bravo Brice's steady tugging at the lariat, at times on the verge of being unseated by the restless movements of the mustang, the sport felt that it was useless longer to struggle against adverse fate.

Then, at the very moment when the star of hope had sunk the lowest, Captain Redblade struggled to his feet, his dark eyes glowing redly.

At sight of the chief alive and apparently but little the worse for the bullet from his revolver, a feeling of intense rage flashed over Perdido, rousing him from his apathy and instilling into him a burning desire to escape and to carry to a complete consummation his work of vengeance.

"Shoot him, Cap; shoot 'im afore he kin work another brace on ther gang, ther di ty cuss!" grated Sweetsie Smith, gingerly applying a sadly soiled kerchief to the little that remained of the lobe of his left ear. "Or turn 'im loose at me, Cap, till I wipes him out! Reckon he's spilled my purty mug from now till the toot ov ole Gabe's trumpet; sides, look a Pete, thar—odds he never gits up! Ef I on'y hed a chainece."

"Ye'd cut yer lucky, jest es ye did once afore ter night!" sneered Bravo Brice, half-turning to face the red-bearded desperado. "Jest hol' that bell-wether clapper o' yourn till I give it lief ter wag, or off goes thet other ear, ye bow-legged fraud!"

Listening coldly to the words of his lieutenant, Captain Redblade turned his eyes from the face of the sport to a critical though seemingly careless survey of the surrounding road-agents.

All with weapons drawn, their eyes glowing and rugged faces expectant, under the shadowy light of the torches they lent force and form to the grotesque scene—a scene worthy the pencil of a Dore in its indescribable wildness and weirdness.

Before Brice had ceased speaking, a rasping snore was heard, and Poker Pete staggered to a sitting posture, his face fairly convulsed with rage, his hands groping blindly at his belt as if in search of a weapon. The next instant, so quickly that the act could not be prevented, his revolver was drawn, raised, and fired point-blank at the heart of the sport.

A sudden reel in, swaying motion on the part of the latter preceded the flash and report by the fraction of a second. Then—how was it? The lariat parted, tumbling Bravo Brice backward in a way far beneath the dignity of so lordly a ruffian, while Perdido, just a leg and an arm showing above the saddle, with a sharp thrust and jangle of his Mexican spurs urged the mustang swiftly out of the circle of light and at a bre'kneck run on down the pass!

"Out of the pan, and out of the rel!" uttered Captain Redblade, as he sent shot after shot at the fleeing captive. Then hurriedly as he returned his weapons to his belt. "No use to waste your lead, pards—he's out of range! Brice remount half your men and see if you can't run him down. If not, strike our trail and follow hot-foot. We'll break camp in an hour."

And turning, the masked chief strode away up the pass.

"Ye heer thet, galoots!" cried Bravo Brice sharply. "You, mith, drop yer dancin'-master airs an' help pore Pete hyar inter camp. An' you, an' you, an' you"—with a jerking inclination of his head to each man addressed, until six men had been told off—"straddle hoss an' foller me. We'll fetch Mister Free Lance ter a rope's end, or bu'st our b'ilers a-tryin' ter get 'im thar!"

With more or less of growling and cursing, the men singled out for the pursuit of Perdido turned away and hurriedly selected the fleetest horses from the number ridden down the pass, then held themselves in readiness for orders from the lieutenant of the band.

Sweetsie Smith, still fuming, and cursing like a trooper—a perfect vessel of wrath and indignation—assisted Poker Pete to his feet and helped him toward the camp.

Meanwhile, Brice, with a torch held aloft in his left hand, and his right grasping the severed end of the lariat, stared with beetling brow and moody face at the latter object, his expression one of doubt and indecision.

"Cain't see through et, durned ef I kin!" he muttered, uneasily turning the end of the rope in his fingers. "I was jest ready to take my Bible oath that Poker Pete's bullet snapped ther thing in too, but ther cut aire too clean fer thet. No, et must 'a' been done 'ith a knife—but where? Not ther

sport's, fer his'n were dug deep in Pete's shoulder; not Pete's, for his'n were gone from his belt, an' 'sides he c'u'dn't 'a' done et thar on ther ground.

"Et were all right w'en ther noose went over ther sport's head. Now, who cut et? Thar was no one nigh enuff, but ther— Hell's furies! c'u'd he 'a' done et!"

"Men aire ready—hyar's yer hoss, lieutenant!" uttered a gruff voice at Brice's side, abruptly breaking in upon his soliloquy, and causing him to start like one detected in the perpetration of some overt act.

Throwing aside the torch, Bravo Brice sprung into the saddle and spurred swiftly down the pass at the head of his men, his mind trying to grasp a reasonable solution to the puzzling enigma.

Touching softly, yet with the bitterness of a mocking devil plainly palpable in the mellow sound, as the storm of yells and curses went up from the outlaws at his unexpected and almost marvelous escape; bending low to avoid the rain of lead that hurtled and stung through the intense darkness of the pass, at times coming dangerously near; plying spur and using voice to urge on the gallant mustang; until far beyond range, Perdido gave no thought to the perils which the deep gloom of his pathway might conceal.

Once out of reach of the lead of his maddened foes, however, he resumed an upright position in the saddle and reduced the speed of his horse to a walk, muttering:

"All depends upon you, now, noble Fleetfoot, so let slow and careful be the word until we are out of the darkness of this cursed place, away from its traps and pitfalls.

"After this night's adventures with the Serpents, I am more than content to go, and leave them to make their way to the mining-camps unwatched by me.

"There is but one thing that makes me even in the least reluctant to tear myself from the red trail for the present—the lace handkerchief. If I but fully understood how it came into the leper's hands! Can it be possible that there is a valid foundation for these wild vagaries that so continually haunt me, or are they but the children of a disordered imagination, bred by the dying confession of the villain Bob Murty, at Santa Fe?

"At times I am tempted to set that confession down as naught but the ravings of a dying man; again, as a deliberately concocted lie on the part of the moribund, to awake in me a certain interest in him and thus insure him a chance to escape should his wounds not prove fatal.

"But, in either event, there was a grain of truth at least in his statements, for I found in the Barranca region this outlaw band, the Serpents of Cimarron, just as he said I would, and that too just in time to deal them a heavy blow before they decamped for the gold-fields of Colorado to carry into effect some fresh scheme of villainy.

"But, so far as I was concerned personally, that sortie against them was a signal failure, for the man I most desired to meet, Captain Redblade, either was not present or successfully eluded the eyes of myself and the Vigilantes.

"Then again, just when I was beginning to doubt the truth of the confession, that part of it relating to Carlotta Dane was brought vividly to mind by my meeting with 'Walking Death,' the Leper, there in the plain; and his voice, as if calling back the veil of years, recalled and brought into prominence the lost girl, thus throwing a ray of doubtful light upon the most enigmatical of Murty's utterances.

"The only conclusion I can reach is if Murty meant that Carlotta Dane is yet alive, and here in the West, then she and the leper are one and the same, incredible as it may seem. Such being the case, I can no longer have reason to believe that she is a captive in the hands of Harold Chetwynd or Captain Redblade. On the contrary, she is at liberty and working against that villain to avenge her wrongs, as only a woman of her peculiar talent and temperament can work. She it was who left the handkerchief and the warning note: who, with her stage-learned arts, played upon the superstitious fears of Blunt Bill and his two colleagues, and effected my release, she—Hark! was that a hoof stroke?"

Reining in abruptly, leaning forward in the saddle, peering sharply through the darkness, Perdido drew his hand back and forth across his brow, as if to clear the cobwebs from his brain, then with every sense on the alert, listened for a repetition of the sound which had broken in upon his musings.

And it came, from far down the pass, faint and indistinct—the gradually receding beat of iron-shod hoofs.

"But one, and that one moving as if led," decided Perdido, pushing onward. "It may be a road-agent, or Carlotta! Who knows? Heavens! I'd deliver up half of everything I own to meet her free of all disguise! Even yet my pulses quicken as her glorious face rises up like a vision from the dead past. Could the black work of that day be undone! Carlotta!—Carlotta! I loved you—love you yet—shall love you till the grave yawns wide to hide me forever from the cruel bloodhounds whom I dare not turn and rend!"

A violent shudder swept over his strong frame. Raising his hands, he pressed his strangely throbbing temples, while his eyes burned with a peculiar phosphorescent glow. Then, his voice changing from liquid softness to metallic harshness, he continued, saying:

"But what a fool am I to talk of love! Bah! I lost all belief, all faith, in that absurd, mythical fever years ago. If Carlotta Dane does live—and there is every reason to believe she does, and is here

among the hills, when we meet it shall be simply as friends long parted—nothing more. For I doubt not that she too has long since outlived all sentimental foolishness.

"Still, did I not know of old how simply able she is to care for herself in this game of death, I would be far less willing to ride away and leave her to fight it out alone. Alone! One weak woman against a score bloodthirsty devils!"

Again his hands went up, pressing his temples as if he feared they would burst; and again that violent shudder crept up and down his form, leaving him pale and speechless.

With head bowed low, his hands hanging listlessly at his side, he left the sagacious mustang to pick its way through the gloomy pass. Arrived at the edge of the prairie stretching away to the east and north, after a glance at the stars he mechanically laid his course toward the latter point of the compass, and pressed his steed into a sharp lope.

And anon, during that long night-ride across the grassy plain, there floated back to the keen ears of the sport that suspicious sound he had first heard in the pass—the dull hoof-beats of a rapidly-moving horse.

The first streak of dawn across the distant eastern horizon found him miles from the scene of his desperate encounter with the Cimarron bandits, bolt upright in the saddle, dashing forward at a sharp run, his eyes and face aflame with passion.

Leading him by a hundred yards was a horseman clad in gray—shadowy, ghost-like—just visible in the dim, uncertain light.

Straight toward the north rode the pursued, sitting the saddle stiffly, the reins hanging idly across the pommel. Not once did he look to right or left or rear; his dark eyes seemed fixed on the far distant horizon in a dull, hopeless stare. But for his voice, urging on his horse, the spectral rider might have been a corpse.

On thundered Perdido, his spurs dripping red, until the dark pall lifted from the plain before the sun's first ruddy rays; on, his black eyes flaming with a strange fire, his revolver gripped in his right hand, every nerve tingling with a wild, fierce joy.

"It is he!" he muttered, again and again, as the distance between him and the fleeing horseman decreased by gradual, almost imperceptible degrees. "It is he! But how came he here? I left him in the pass, and yet—Ha! he is bound to his horse! his hands are at his back!"

Another jangle of the spurs, a mighty bound, a swift rush on the part of the black mustang, and Perdido shot alongside his flying foe. Another second, and his iron grasp was upon the idly-flapping reins checking both steeds with a suddenness that sent them back upon their haunches.

A swift glance at the serpent-encircled sombrero, at the black mask of the bound rider, and the mad sport shouted.

"Devil! This is all—more—than I could have asked!"

Simple in themselves, the words possessed a tragic significance; but one man should ride away from that lonely spot in the plain, and the one remaining would be food for the coyotes and the vultures!

The large, expressive, dark eyes of the road-agent chief fixed themselves upon the face of Perdido in an intense, burning stare. The lower edge of the mask fluttered as if he were about to speak; then he shrunk back, and the words remained unuttered.

The blood had receded from the sport's face, bringing into repulsive prominence the dark bruises and blood-stains. His eyes shone with a dull, red glow. An icy smile, far deadlier than the blackest of scowls, revealed his sharp, white teeth, and imparted to his curling lips a cruel, wolfish look. Slowly and deliberately, as if to prolong an exquisite pleasure, he raised his revolver to a level with Captain Redblade's heart.

"The game has changed, and it is my age and your say, Harold Chetwynd!" he cried. "If anything you can say will lighten your burden of deceit and treachery, speak! You have but a moment of time! One look at that handsome face of yours, then—" and Perdido leaned forward and plucked aside the mask.

One swift glance at the handsome but terribly drawn and haggard face thus revealed, and the sport sharply drew back, dropping his weapon, and in a hoarse, strained voice, exclaimed:

"Great God! Can this be you, Carlotta Dane—you, the road-agent chief?"

CHAPTER VIII.

CAPTAIN NONAME AND HIS NONENTITIES.

"ROAD-AGENTS? Wal, no, stranger—not on my run thar hain't eny, an' hain't bin since ther Vigilantes went thro' Bludso's Band, nigh onter six months ago. They was a pesky set, an' more'n one pore devil ketched his last fit ov sickness a-buckin' ag'in 'em w'ile they worked this trail. They 'ud hold up ther ole huss once a week reg'lar."

"It got to be a chestnut, I suppose? Did the passengers never resist?"

"Wal, I reckon ef ye was ter git down an' look, ye'd find a few"—with a chuckle—"jest a few, min' ye, ov ther ear-marks ov ther toll-takers on this hyer dear ole vehike! Ther galoots war derved lib'ral 'ith theyre lead; an' ther passengers fer ther most part war ther cits ov ther Bar—hustlers, every one ov 'em. Et war wuss nor Kilkenny cats."

And blowing a mouthful of smoke out of his wide nostrils, Buck Bridger, relic of the old Overland, knocked the ashes from his cheroot, and, a reflective look on his bronzed, beardless face, skillfully flicked a fly from the ear of his off-leader with his long whip-lash.

"Yas, them war gay times on ther trail betwixt Golconda and Nabob's Bar," he continued, darting a

swift, sidelong glance at the face of his outside passenger. "Ef—"

"So you have said before," broke in the soft, purring voice of the man on the box, as if he had grown weary of the subject, or was not desirous of hearing any detailed account of the devilry of Bludso's cut-throats. "We must be nearing Nabob's Bar, Buck?"

"Th' huss 'pears ter be movin'—cain't say 'bout ther Bar!" sniffed the manipulator of the ribbons, plainly nettled at the thinly-veiled insolence of his volunteer companion. "Ef ther camp aire whar et war last trip, et aire 'bout five miles down ther trail; ef et's—"

The remainder of the reply was cut short by the heavy report of a Winchester.

Then, out from the dense undergrowth on the west side of the trail, a "six" at full cock in each hand, leaped a man—a slight, wiry fellow, of athletic build, clad in gray corduroy, his face hidden behind a black silk mask, and his head covered with a white sombrero, around which was coiled the stuffed skin of a prairie rattler transfixed by a blood-red dagger!

"Down brakes, and round up, Jehu! or coil your next lash in Kingdom Come!" cried the personage, in cold, ringing tones, halting in the middle of the narrow trail, his revolvers elevated to bear upon the two men upon the box. "And you!"—addressing the outside passenger—"up with your hands, palms out and empty, or I reckon you'll wilt as if you'd been hit by a full-grown thunderbolt! No foolishness, gentlemen, but business, first, last, and all the time!"

Old Buck Bridger needed no second invitation to draw rein. Already his horses were far back upon their haunches. The rifle-shot from the bush was enough—he wanted no hint more forcible. It was hold up or die!

As for the outside passenger, the odd smile which a moment before had curled his mustached lips died away. A strange flush crept into his pallid face, a gleam of tigerish eagerness into his large black eyes. His hands seemed to creep toward his belted weapons; a moment of hesitancy, then they were raised, empty.

"Sensible—both of you!" commented the masked toll-gatherer, just a tinge of irony in his smooth, well-modulated tones, as his eyes met those of the passenger on the box, with a steady, unswerving stare. "Now, my genial Jehu, shout it down to the people of your old hearse that Captain Noname, of Nowhere, and his band of Nonentities are in complete possession of the road and the outfit, and that with us it is simply a question of their gold-dust or their lives!"

Little need that Old Buck Bridger convey the sum and substance of the cool, iron-nerved toll-taker's words to the inside passengers. The shot and the sudden stoppage of the coach had given them an inkling as to the true state of affairs without and before the road-agent's pointed request was ended a door in the side of the remarkable vehicle opened with a violent bang, and the upper half of a more than ordinarily lank form was thrown into view, to be as quickly withdrawn.

"Road-agents! by the Lord Harry!" ejaculated a sharp, irascible voice, while the speaker made a dive into his wide boot-tops, fetching up a pair of ancient French dueling pistols. "A dozen of 'em at least, and all in masks! Draw, gentlemen, and defend these ladies and yourselves. If we must—"

"Now, I can't see but one—dern my cats ef I kin!" was interpreted in a wheezy sort of tone, from the opposite side of the coach. "Bin a-lookin' ever since that shot, too. Ther 'bang' skeert ye w'en ye opened ther door so sudden, Doc. Cool down an' draw et sorter mild. An' fer he'ving's sake, putt away them popguns, ef ye aire hungry ter see Nabob's Bar this night. Ther br'sh aire full ov ther cusses, an' w'en yer give et out ther ye aire on ther shoot, big, w'y ye jest saw yer own laig off—that's all! They w'u'dn't leave a smell ov us!"

"Wrong 'ere, my hearty!" cried Captain Noname, catching the hurriedly-spoken words as he strode forward. "We'd increase the smell, until the coyotes and the buzzards had got in their work."

Then, raising his voice just a trifle, and instilling into it an authoritative ring:

"Lieutenant Naught, you and Mr. Nihil come forward."

"Lieutenant Nothing, hold your men in readiness to riddle the old hearse from boot to box at the first sign of resistance."

At the giving of the first command, two cloaked and cowed figures appeared from the roadside, and moved forward with an easy, gliding motion. Their long, loose black cloaks effectually concealed the contour of their forms, but it was apparent that they were below the medium in altitude, of slender build, and vested with catlike agility.

"Mr. Naught, take my place, and stand ready to put a quietus upon any move of the gents on the box."

"And you, Nihil—station yourself on the off side of the hearse, and don't hesitate to drill any one who offers to resist."

The two cloaked figures glided silently into position and the chief strode to the open door of the stage.

"A thousand pardons, ladies and gentlemen, for this interruption of your journey," he exclaimed, bowing low, his tones filled with mock regret, his glowing eyes scanning with critical closeness the faces of the half dozen passengers within. "Believe me, I deeply deplore being compelled to request each of you to step down and disgorge; but at the same time, mind you, at the first move toward resistance or escape, some of you will find the 'hearse' of the vernacular a hearse in reality!"

Smooth, unruffled, carelessly-uttered, the silken accents trenchant with bitter force, the words were fraught with significance that seemed to quell even the most belligerently inclined of the luckless insiders."

"Oh! Lawd! we aire in fer et!" exclaimed the owner of the wheezy voice, a short, bulky-looking fellow, clad in the free-and-easy style of the genuine mining-camp bum. "W'y, oh! w'y did I go an' do et?" he continued, half-aloud, his tones indescribably doleful. "I didn't want to, and I wish I hedn't; an' I 'u'dn't—no, not even fer ther Kingpin ov Nabob's Bar hisself, ef et hedn't bin fer her purty blue eyes! Dang my buttons! I mought 'a' knowed he'd light on me hot-foot fu'st ov ther lay-out, eny—"

A hasty rustle of feminine skirts, then: "Now, calm yourself, Mr. Jolly—pay do!" swiftly interjected a clear, young voice, as a slender, pliant form swung forward and a daintily-gloved hand dropped pat against the pursed-up lips of the fleshy passenger. "Be quiet, and I am quite certain that you will not be harmed; let your tongue run on, and I am equally sure you will suffer!"

The threatening import of the words was apparent enough to have been readily comprehended by a man of far less mental acuteness than this fleshy specimen of the *ge-us* bum. As it was, Nicholas Jolly's little beady black eyes stared down into the beautiful face so temptingly near his own empurpled visage—down into the clear, blue orbs of the girl, reading there an expression half-warning, half-beseeching. An instant thus, then his bulky form swung back until his mouth was free of the clinging hand. A swift, sidelong glance straight into the eyes of the road-agent, then:

"Tain't thet—'tain't thet, my dear Miss Axfell! Only wish et wus! W'at need fer ole Nick Jolly ter be skeered fer his mortal corporeity? Nary need! Et's to 'er, miss—w'at ef ther cuss sh u'd—"

This second hiatus in the speech of the fat passenger was filled in with a sort of choking, gasping sound—an inarticulate expression either of fear or astonishment, for Miss Axfell had thrown herself forward, almost upon his Falstaffian middle, thus bringing her queenly head into such close proximity to his shaggy pow that her lips almost touched his ear.

"You mean to betray me, Nicholas Jolly!"

"Not another word, or you die!"

Clear and distinct, swiftly spoken, and yet in tones so low that none save the one addressed could hear, the words sent an unmistakable shiver through the form of Jolly.

Intuitively, his gaze dropped to the daintily-gloved hand resting upon his broad chest and hidden from the view of his fellow-occupants of the stage by the slender, clinging form—looked down into the muzzle of a cocked derringer held by that hand, and instantly realized that Miss Axfell was in deadly earnest.

"Nay, nay, Pauline; I'll betray thee not!" quoth he, in melodramatic but guarded accents, his eyes again covertly shifting to meet the flashing orbs of Captain Noname. "Dern my cats! Gal, ye hed orter know ole Nick Jolly better than that. Jest say ther words, an' I'll p'int ther masked hollyon's toes upward, so that ther sunflowers an' ther lilies may nestle over his grave! Et aire jest like sech a cuss ter go thro' sech a mis'abul-lookin' orphan'es m— an' ef he do, et aire a cold day fer ther Great Mogul!"

"Come, now," broke in the smooth tones of the road-agent chief, as he deftly raised the muzzle of his revolver until it bore full upon the head of the fat passenger; "step down and out—you first, my noble Romeo of the heavy jowl, if thy loving Juliet will suffer thee to depart her warm embrace for the nonce. Quick, for time is money. To dally longer would be to cast pearls before swine."

Impelled, through motives most powerful, to her strange conduct, Miss Axfell, at the insolent words, sprung erect and confronted Captain Noname, her blue eyes burning vividly, her face deathly in its pallor but for the hectic glow in each delicately-rounded cheek.

A slight swaying of her lithe form, a sudden entwining of her hands and wrists, then her arms shot out, and a brace of derringers, cocked and ready for instant use, covered the breast of the waiting toll-taker.

That a tragedy was imminent none could doubt. The slightest pressure upon the slender triggers of Miss Axfell's leveled weapons meant death swift and sure to Captain Noname.

The occupants of the stage literally "held their breath." A leaden ball through the heart of the outlaw meant death to them!

Undaunted, Captain Noname stood quite still, his brilliant dark eyes fixed upon the face of the mad-dened girl in a gaze of strange intentness.

A moment thus; then Miss Axfell's lips moved, as if she were about to speak.

The words, trembling upon the verge of utterance, were never spoken.

A doleful groan from Old Nick Jolly, a sudden quivering and swaying of his short, bulky form, then his almost unnaturally long arms deftly shot out, inclosing the girl in a bear-like hug, while his grimy palms closed firmly around the leveled weapons in such a way as to prevent the hammers falling.

"Hate ter do et, miss—I sw'ar I do!" he gurgled, apologetically, his covertly roving eyes quickly noting the look of relief upon the faces of the other passengers. "W'at kin we do? That's whole hay-dogans ov ther varlets in ther bresh, an' they'd fight like wil'cats ef we ever teched ther chief. Et's simply our gold-dust or our lives, an' et aire moughty leetle ov eyther we hev ter lose. Calm yer-self, miss, fer— Great hev'ings!"

Little won'er that the rough uttered the exclamation, for, with one swift, terrified glance over her shoulder into the florid face of her captor, Miss Axfell had fallen back, inert and apparently lifeless in his arms.

"The brutes!" sharply uttered a clear, feminine voice from the rear of the coach, a sudden blaze of passion marring the natural mellowness and richness of the tones. "And this, too, in the land ruled by the strong hand of the Vigilantes and good Judge Lynch!"

Had the blade of an assassin been plunged hilt-deep into his back, Captain Noname could scarcely have been more startled than by that voice.

Instantly his eyes sought out the face of the speaker—a woman of age anywhere from twenty-five to thirty, of fine form, and garbed in a neat gray traveling costume; a brunette of rare beauty and perfection of feature, yet whose face bore the unmistakable indices of strength and decision.

Her eyes, large and of midnight darkness, fairly blazed as they glared unwaveringly into the orbs of the outlaw; her soft white hands rested upon the butts of a pair of elegant weapons, half-drawn from their resting-place in her girdle, and just visible through the meshes of a light wrap.

As if suddenly confronted by one risen from the grave, stood Captain Noname, drinking in every feature of her anger-distorted yet beautiful face; then, as her eyes shifted to the strange symbol upon his white sombrero, he quickly stepped back, just a pace, bowing crisply, while a soft and musical, but peculiarly irritating ripple of laughter escaped him.

"Beg pardon, madam—madam—Which is it now?—Dane or Axfell, or something else?"

At this from the outlaw, bringing the woman half to her feet either in anger or consternation, the dark genius whom Nicholas Jolly had addressed as "Doc," sprung up, bubbling over with wrath.

"Don't answer if you don't care to!" quothly went on Captain Noname, scarcely deigning the bellicose Doc Skaggs a glance. "What's in a name, anyhow? Whether maid or wife—Dane or Axfell—I'll lay a thousand you're the same gay gal as of yore."

"And permit me to remark, Carlotta, that the 'land ruled by the strong hand of the Vigilantes and good Judge Lynch,' is not likely to continue a popular and pleasant summer resort for gentlemen of a certain sort"—significantly touching the symbol upon his sombrero. "Is the hint sufficient, or must I talk?"

That this shaft from the redoubtable Noname was not delivered at random, was instantly attested by its peculiar effect upon the woman. Her color did not change, nor her eyes falter in their hateful stare; but a deadly tremor seemed to have seized upon her, and, as if greatly against her will, she sunk back upon the seat—terrified, speechless!

For a fleeting moment, a strange silence hung over the scene. Then came a slight shuffling of raw-hide boots; a peculiar hitching and wriggling of his lank form, and Doc Skaggs opened his lips to speak.

Opened them, then stopped—his lower jaw fallen, his odd-looking eyes fairly bulging from their sockets, an expression of deep-seated consternation frozen upon his cadaverous visage.

"Correct, Skaggs—you're wise beyond your day and generation!" coldly uttered Captain Noname, his finger playing lightly against the delicate trigger of his revolver, the muzzle of which had been shifted to stare the lank rough straight between the eyes. "You may speak once, and die, or hold your clapper and live to repent of any number of such games as you and your gang have attempted to work to-day."

"But this foolishness has gone on long enough—five minutes have I wasted in this exchange of chin-music, time that cannot be recalled from the past."

"Now step down and out, one and all of you—you first, Skaggs."

"And remember, any attempt to resist will be the death-warrant of one and all!"

Utterly cowed the gangling rough obeyed the command.

CHAPTER IX.

A STORM BREWING IN NABOB'S BAR.

"OOP-LA! 'Ot stuff! hoe 'er down fer 'Anner Jane! Der ole gal win four times han' turns hup soda hon der new deal! 'Ot stuff! ha slug she win hagin'!"

Couched in the cockney dialect, rising high, in accents of seeming excitement above the varied sounds of revelry, the outburst provoked a ripple of laughter and focused upon the speaker the eyes of the three-score men thronged around the gaming-tables and at the bar in Idaho's Eldorado.

Even Elegant Fitz Jim, the *blase* manipulator of the silver box at the first of the row of three faro tables, paused, with his finger upon the "soda" ready to slip it aside, and stared across the table, his cold blue eyes opened wide in wonder, real or consummately simulated.

"I don't know—the windows are closed, but the door is open," he uttered musingly, his voice soft and purring, yet distinctly audible, his lips curling in a peculiar smile, his big blue eyes staring straight up into the face of the cockney gamester. "There's no breeze to-night—it *must* have wings!"

And Elegant Fitz Jim followed the words with a jeering laugh.

"Gentle sports, hi ham Diamond Dick, der one han' honly! My money whispers!" crisply enunciated the man across the table, supporting his weight upon his hands and leaning forward until his face was within a foot of the dealer's.

"Fifty dollars hon der queen to win—der slug han' hit's winnin's ter stand hopen hon der card to der

hend hof der deal. An' say, you, Jimmy Fresh—hif dat hain't henough, w'ot's der limit?"

Diamond Dick, as the speaker had brusquely introduced himself, was the oddity in that Mecca of oddities. A hunchback, just below the average height of man, with an abnormally full and well-rounded chest; hands and wrists white and slender, the long, tapering fingers ablaze with precious stones; face pale and effeminate, with regular features, and adorned by long, gracefully-curling mustaches of golden brown; eyes dark and piercing, and overhung by shaggy brows; hair, abundant, long and wavy, and covered by a glossy silk tie tipped jauntily over one eye; attire of broadcloth, with immaculate linen, a row of diamond studs twinkling in the snowy shirt front; not a weapon visible, yet not a man present but would have sworn he was armed *cap-o-pie*—all in all, a man who could charm or repel at will, and one with whom no reader of human nature would care to chance a quarrel; for there was that in the seemingly insipid face which at once denoted desperate courage and treacherous cunning.

Again the peculiarly irritating laugh of Elegant Fitz Jim, the particularly "bad" man of Nabob's Bar, rippled forth, as the cockney accents of Diamond Dick ceased.

"And so you are the— Now, my dear friend Richard, for heaven's sake draw back to your own side of the table; don't encroach upon the narrow space allotted to me. I'm no hog, believe me, but—but—er—it must be confessed that your breath is not exactly attar of roses, Richard! Now don't—"

"No matter has to that!" shortly returned the cockney, his quick eyes noting the expectant faces of the crowd around the table. "I know yer game, Jimmy—tork till cock-crow, han' ye won't rattle me! Hit's my first night bin Nabob's Bar, han' hi come hexpectin' ha' rough row ter hoe. But hit's business first, then pleasure, with yours truly. Run hout der keerds; wen der game's ended—then, Jimmy, we'll see who's der boss Maverick on *this* range! Satisfactory?"

"Quite—I accept the challenge in the spirit in which it is given," coolly replied Elegant Fitz Jim, settling into an easy position in his cushioned chair. "The limit to-night is, in cash, \$7,000—in checks, any amount you've a mind to put down."

"And now, my dear Richard, trot out your horses—Lay on, Macduff, and damned be he who first cries! 'Hold! enough!'"

An icy smile parting his mustached lips, just enough to reveal his sharp white teeth, the hunchback seated himself at the table. A deft motion of his right hand, and upon the queen lay twenty golden slugs.

A buzz of admiration went up from the denizens of the Eldorado.

"Pards, he aire a fightin' cock with spurs full-grown!" ejaculated a short, squat ruffian, with powerful shoulders and matted, tangled hair and beard of fiery red, standing directly behind the stranger-sport, his husky tones expressive of a high degree of admiration.

"A high-roller, too, Sweetie, or I'm ugly es sin!" was the prompt rejoinder, from a lank, villainous-looking fellow beside the first speaker.

"Cain't tell me—Fi z Jeems'll look like ther ruins ov an Egyptian mummy by ther time he's through with this hyar leetle racket!"

A quick up-lifting of his blue eyes, a steady look into the faces of the two men, and the dealer, with an inclination of head toward the bar, said:

"The poison dispensary is to your rear, gents—if you're talking to wet your whistles. Drink, if you can bridle your tongues long—"

The rest of the sentence was wasted, for, with alacrity truly remarkable, the two ruffians had headed for the bar.

"You seem to have a fair conception of the meaning of any quotation from the bard, judging from the size of your stack on the queen," he continued, addressing Diamond Dick. "Or probably you deem the first blow half the battle," with a sneer.

The hunchback laughed—a dry, mirthless sort of sound.

"Not if it his der kind hof 'blow' delivered by you, Jimmy Fresh, three 'undred han' sixty-five days hin der year," he returned. "Han' speakin' hof quotations—there his hanother that fits this festive hoccasion."

"It is what?"

Smilingly coldly, a triumphant flash—spiced with just a suspicion of deadly malignancy—in his dark eyes, Diamond Dick bent forward, and in low, intense tones strangely like the purring of a cat, yet rankling with virulent bitterness, hissed:

"*'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.'*"

A slight start, a shiver as of one touched in a vital part, and the blood receded from the handsome face of Elegant Fitz Jim.

A nervous twirl of his dark mustache, a swift glance around to assure himself that the words of Diamond Dick had reached his ears alone, then his luridly glowing blue eyes sought the evil, gloating face of the hunchback.

A moment of silence, unbroken save by the deep breathing of the two men, then:

"The game is made, gentlemen—the cards are about to turn. You can't win unless you bet."

Hard, cold, even-toned, the stereotyped words fell almost mechanically from the tongue of the faro-dealer. Even to those but slightly acquainted with Elegant Fitz Jim, and the imperturbable coolness which had always characterized his conduct in such affairs, it was obvious that the cautiously-uttered sentence from Diamond Dick—enigmatical as to its application though it was—had reached a vulnerable point in the dashing sport's vaunted armor of self-control.

And even as the nimble fingers of the knight of

the silver box slipped aside the "soda," revealing first the tray of spades, then the queen of diamonds, his white face bore a perplexed look, while through his brain ran strange, wild thoughts.

"Did hl 'ear some 'un mention Dame Fortune's fickle smile, hor did my hears deceive me?" exclaimed the hunchback, complacently, as Elegant Fitz Jim with a series of graceful motions swept down the golden stake and dropped upon the queen a double stack of yellow checks. "Honly ha turn hout hof der box, han' hup comes der Dame hof Diamonds, hotherwise Fortune, peart han' chipper!"

"'Ot stuff! let 'er roll, me noble Bob-royal—let 'er roll!"

His strong white teeth biting savagely into his nether lip; his long fingers poised over the silver box, in readiness to make the turn; his face set with savage determination, Elegant Fitz Jim sat bolt upright in his chair, his madly glowing eyes sweeping restlessly over the lay-out, then up into the faces of the surrounding throng, and on beyond, to meet the dark orbs of no less a personage than Idaho, the giant proprietor of the Eldorado.

A magnetic look, fraught with intense significance.

And that exchange of glances, though of the briefest duration, seemed to imbue the dealer with ease and confidence. Again, in the same dead monotone, his voice rung out:

"Once more, to win or lose, gentlemen! Open up your weasel-skins and roll out the dust! Before you is the royal road to—"

"You are wanted at the bar, Jim—at once," interpolated a deep base voice, as the heavy hand of Idaho dropped upon the shoulder of the dashing sport. "I'll handle the tiger for the boys until you return."

A bitter imprecation from the hunchback, as Elegant Fitz Jim arose—a look of blackest malignity, flashed into the face of Idaho, then—how was it accomplished? In the hands of Diamond Dick were a brace of revolvers—thoroughly elegant and reliable tools, gold-mounted, and of the double-action patent—the frowning muzzles covering the banker and his dealer!

"Don't move, gents, or attempt to draw—you'll sleep side by side to-morrow in the Nabob's Bar necropolis, if you do!" fiercely enunciated the mad-dened hunchback, his eyes assuming a dead, glassy look in his extreme rage, his elbows sinking until they rested upon the green cloth of the table, and the hammers of his weapons springing back and trembling on a poise, from the reckless pressure of his fingers against the triggers.

"Well! well! well!" slowly ejaculated Idaho, the giant gambler, arching his black brows in simulated astonishment. "What is the matter with you sonny?—found a bent pin in your seat, or is it only a sudden attack of colic? Barkeep!" raising his voice, "a lump of sugar and some paregoric!"

A ripple of laughter from the crowd; then a sudden parting, right and left, leaving the three men in undisputed possession of the field.

"Matter enough!" savagely gritted Diamond Dick, a dull red gleam intensifying the glassy appearance of his eyes. "If Nabob's Bar can show nothing better hin der shape hof men than you, Shanghai, han' your puppet, Elegant Fitz Jim, she 'ad best 'aul down 'er colors, has na bang-hup camp! Bah! 'e 'u'd run from 'is shadow, hof ha moonlit night!" with a swift inclination of his head toward the dealer.

"If you have reference to my leaving the table—" "Struck 'er plumb-center, didn't you?" interrupted the hunchback, with a sneer. "Man hagaint man—cards first, then weapons—was der hagreement, n'ai—"

"It will be kept, to the letter!" broke in Elegant Fitz Jim, impatiently. "Have the kindness to keep your eyes upon the box until my return, and—you shall have your fill, never fear, in any way you want it. I presume that our mutual friend, Idaho, will stand good for my return."

"Till the heavens fall," quoth the giant.

"Satisfactory," curtly uttered the hunchback, lowering his weapons.

With a bow of mock courtesy, Elegant Fitz Jim turned and strode away, followed by the eyes of Idaho and the hunchback, until his athletic form was lost to view in the darkness without the door.

Then the eyes of the two men met in a look of deep significance. An evil smile wreathed the heavy, sensual lips of the giant gambler.

A swift, sweeping glance up and down the long room, until his eyes rested upon two men—one a short, squat, heavily-built fellow, the other tall and lank, and both from their faces villains of the meanest and most despicable type.

A word passed between the two, as they noticed Idaho's eyes fixed upon them, and an expression of expectancy settled upon their evil faces. The giant turned his head and stared out the door. Whether it was a hint to the two desperadoes that their presence in the Eldorado was not desirable, or a prearranged signal, they at once left the place.

On emerging from the saloon and gambling-hell, Elegant Fitz Jim had been confronted by a tall, well-built form, almost the counterpart of himself, but more roughly dressed.

"It is you, Hank?" cautiously uttered the sport, halting in the darkness.

"Yours, truly, Jim," was the response. "Anything wanting?"

"Yes; but let us get out into the open. It has gone into proverb that walls have ears—a saw that don't hold water if it won't apply to the Eldorado."

Silently the two men withdrew to a safe distance, halting in the bleak shadow of a stunted tree.

"You have seen the hunchback stranger, Hank?"

"Yes."

"He came when?"

"You have me there. When he came, or whence, I know not," was the reply, with a shrug of the shoulders that was lost in the darkness. "I saw him first in the Eldorado, just now."

"As did I. He is not what he seems, Hank; he is in deep and artful disguise. Whether his deformity is real or pretended I can't say; but that his character—a cockney gambler—is assumed, I am satisfied. As a general thing, he carries the dialect to a nicety; but at times, when excited, a sentence will slip out as straight as a ramrod, without the slightest mixing of the h's."

"You suspect his object to be—"

"Murder—myself the victim!"

Elegant Fitz Jim uttered the words carelessly, as if not at all troubled or annoyed by the unpleasant suspicion.

"A hired assassin?" inquired Hank in a startled but guarded voice.

"No—one striking from motives of revenge, I judge; for he must have come in with Old Buck Bridger to-night, and was therefore ignorant, until a few minutes ago, of my presence in Nabob's Bar."

"You are wrong in the latter part of your surmise, at least; for the hearse from Golconda has not yet made its appearance, late as it is," quickly rejoined Hank. "But a few minutes ago I passed Major Axfell on his way to Limerick's Palace, pale with anxiety."

A low whistle escaped Elegant Fitz Jim.

"He fears the cause of delay has been road-agents or—"

"Foul play from the Darnley crew," quietly supplied Hank. "Rufus Darnley had cause to suspect that, if Miss Axfell reached Nabob's Bar in safety, to-morrow would see his last claim upon the Great Mogul vanish."

"I see! I see!" uttered Elegant Fitz Jim, musingly. "I insisted all along that it was the height of folly for the major to send his daughter alone upon so hazardous an errand."

"To come back to this other matter, Hank. Since we have no means of determining the time of the arrival in camp of this hunchback, Diamond Dick, it is more than likely, as he is in disguise, that one of the principals of the Great Mogul affair has dropped onto our game and set up a job against me."

"But, whether the assassin is working for himself or another, he has recognized me, and betrayed the fact that he is cognizant of certain things in my past—among others, that unfortunate affair in Cincinnati, in which that dashing adventuress, Lisette Cremola, was a prominent actor."

"Indeed, from certain words he let fall, and from his eyes and facial expression, I could for a moment have taken my Bible oath that Lisette Cremola and Diamond Dick were one and the same person!"

"Impossible!" ejaculated Hank.

"Yes, the idea was most absurd," admitted the dealer in a tone that almost contradicted his words. "But the rascal has spotted me, and in turn I want his every move piped. Given half a chance, he'll block our game. See the lads, Hank, at once, and set the machine a-going. Then, if the dashing Richard betrays an alarming degree of precocity, he will awake some fine morn to find himself transported, body and boots, over the range into our private Institution of Detention."

Full of grim satisfaction were the tones of Elegant Fitz Jim.

"It shall be as you say," said Hank, slowly. "And the surveillance shall begin at once, too; for if the hunchback is in the pay of a factor in the Great Mogul affair, I am greatly mistaken if the attempt to assassinate you is not made during the fight he has challenged you to make after your sitting at cards."

"And I have a word of advice to offer, Jim. You are the challenged party; and, as such, to you falls the choice of weapons, the naming of place and conditions. Let the tools be revolvers; this open, the scene; the conditions such as suit you best."

"My idea, exactly," promptly returned Elegant Fitz Jim. "Of course, the duel will be fought to-night, if the marshal can be gotten out of the way long enough to prevent his sticking an official finger in the pie. But I shall name the hour when the great harvest moon is at its height, for by its mellow radiance I can easily wing the hunchback at fifty paces."

"Then, too, such an arrangement will enable you and the lads to keep your eyes upon the gang, and block any attempt at foul play. You may—"

"Hark! what is that sound?"

And with the exclamation both men assumed a listening attitude.

"It is the hearse, rounding up at Limerick's Palace," said Hank, after a moment's silence. "Perhaps, after all, Old Buck and his precious freight pulled through unmolested."

"I don't know," returned Elegant Fitz Jim, his voice, even more than his words, betraying doubt. "You say Rufus Darnley had an inkling of the nature of Miss Axfell's errand to Golconda. If so, the odds are about nine-and-ninety to one that the hearse has been rifled."

"Miss Axfell is a shrewd girl," suggested Hank.

"True; but Darnley is no less so. However, an hour will put an end to our doubts. In the mean time, there is much to do."

Moving nearer his companion and sinking his voice to a whisper, Elegant Fitz Jim spoke rapidly and earnestly.

At the expiration of ten minutes, the two men left the shadow of the tree, and walked slowly toward the Eldorado.

Watchful as they were, two figures—one tall and

lank, the other heavy and powerful—glided away in the darkness, undetected.

"Let us hasten—Diamond Dick will fret himself into a fever of impatience at my absence, brief as it has been," said Elegant Fitz Jim, with a careless laugh, whereupon they quickened their steps.

Arrived at the Eldorado, they crossed the threshold, to enter upon the second scene in the maddest, wildest night ever known in Nabob's Bar!

CHAPTER X.

THE MAN FROM HARD LUCK AGAIN.

"ROAD-AGENTS! Now don't mention et—sech gentry as Bludso's Band aren't a sarcumstance, I tell ye! Jest wait till I lubricates!"

A strange hush followed, holding full sway in the long, rudely-furnished apartment.

The tables had been deserted. That portion of the camp's populace present was literally packed in a dense throng before the bar, confronting a tall, gangling, roughly-clad specimen of humanity standing face outward, his elbows resting carelessly upon the rail of the bar, a glass of raw whisky in his right hand, his stogy-clad feet planted wide apart, his sombrero pushed well back upon his tangled gray locks, and his honest weather-beaten face aglow with excitement.

"Old Buck Bridger, by the Lord Harry!" ejaculated Elegant Fitz Jim, in an undertone, as the high, cracked voice died away in a hollow gurgle peculiar to the old Overlander's process of lubrication.

"Barkeep—'nuther ov ther same sort, tarant'ler laigs an' all!"

"Ter git back ter ther subjec' in han', pards, et aire jest as I tells ye—thar's toll-takers on ther Golconda trail, sich cusses as c'u'd lay Bludso's Band cold an' not ha'f try, eyther! Dang my regermental buttons! ef ever I see—"

"Down brakes. Back—keep your toes on the straight and narrow line," tersely broke in the deep tones of Idaho, the giant gambler.

This, in view of Buck's well-known tendency to exaggerate, produced a general laugh and at once put the waiting crowd at ease.

Deigning Idaho but a freezing stare, the garrulous prince of the ribbons calmly continued:

"But I'll asseverate w'at ther galumplin' cusses did—a'ter w'ich overgrown lunmoxes in glass houses kin throw their stones—ef they kin!"

A significant cough, a Frenchy shrug of his massive shoulders, and the giant stared hard at Old Buck Bridger, an evil light dancing in his habitually half-closed black eyes, a smile, half-mocking, half-incredulous, lending an unusually disagreeable expression to his heavily-whiskered face.

"W'en ther luss was bowlin' along, 'bout five mile back," Buck went on, "a Winchester cracked in ther bushes 'longside, an' out inter ther trail hopped a cur'us critter in black mask, a 'six' grabbed in each paw, one lookin' powerful anxious ter fix a gen'laman 'bout my build fer plantin', t'other likewise squintin' up in a way kalkilated ter make ther tenderfoot on ther box yearn fer ther land o' his nativity."

"Down brakes!" yelled ther feller in ther road—jes'es you sed it a minute ago, Idaho, on'y more savage-like—an' I reckoned es how I hed no time t' argue ther matter, an' so jes' rounded up."

"Then out ov ther bresh piled two more ov ther pirates, an' held ther two ov us on ther box under kiver, w'ile Cap'n Noname, as ther boss robber told us war his name, sidled up ter ther huss ter tech ther pilgrims inside."

"An' Lordee! w'at a job he did!"

"Thar war Major Oxfell's darter, a gal givin' ther han'dle ov Priscilla Twoheart, an' four galoots—Nicholas Jolly, Doctor Skaggs, Sweetwater Smith and Peter Peasly—on board, an' I reckon ther toll-taker made a heavy haul from ther row kicked up by sart'n ones ov ther party."

"But thet warn't a sarcumstance ter w'at follered. A'ter ther pilgrims hed bin cleaned out, w'at did this hyar berdered road-agent do, but go ter work an' han'cuff Jolly an' Skaggs, an' Smith an' Peasly together, an' then snap a pa'r ov bracelets ov ther same pat'ern onter Miss Priscilla Twoheart!"

Delivered with all the unction and impressiveness that Bridger could command, the startling statement set the listening crowd agape.

"The infernal villain!" E should be 'anged without mercy!" gritted Diamond Dick, the hunchback, a strange glow in his dead black eyes.

This sentiment was instantly seconded by half a hundred voices.

"P'raps," sententiously uttered Old Buck Bridger, with a dubious toss of his grizzled locks. "Leastwise, 'twas a rough deal ter ring in on sech a purty, harmless-lookin' critter as ther gal."

"Wal, a'ter he hed ther five ov 'em securely ironed, Cap'n Noname bundled 'em all back inter ther huss, an' closed an' fastened ther door. Then he out 'ith a pencil an' paper, an' writ a note, w'ich same he passed up ter me, sayin' es how I war ter deliver it an' ther people inside ter Marshal Saul Temple, hyar in Nabob's Bar."

A second burst of wondering exclamations; then Idaho, with a palpable sneer, asked:

"And did you carry out the instructions of this dashing highway thief, Captain Noname?"

Overpowering contempt visible in every lineament of his bronzed, wrinkled face, Old Buck, sporting with disgust, retorted:

"I hain't on ther witness stand yit, Mr Idaho; an' I kin unfold any o'ertrue tale 'thout help!"

"Barkeep—'nuther ov ther same sort, on'y a le-tle less corn-juice an' a bit more tarant'ler laigs, ef ye please."

Then, as if satisfied that the rebuke administered

to the gambler had been sufficiently crushing, Bridger again faced the crowd, and took up the threads of his startling narrative.

"This hyar Cap'n Noname was a jim-dandy, in his own peculiar way, sure's ye're all a foot high, pards."

"He was a smallish man, an' so well disguised thet I mought stan' face-to-face 'ith him hyar an' not know him."

"Ther most remarkable thing 'bout him was his sombrero—a light one, 'round w'ich was ther stuffed skin ov a prairie rattler, held in place by a small red dagger."

"I noticed thet, partic'lar."

"Wal, a'ter handin' me ther dockymet fer Saul Temple he stepped back, kinder bowed, an' wished us good luck inter camp, but advised thet we look out fer snags ahead!"

And leaving his auditors to make the most of his impressiveness, the narrator solemnly raised his beaded glass and allowed the villainous decoction within to trickle slowly down his throat.

"Pears ter me es ef ye don't keep jest ther stuff ye hed orter, Idaho," he grumbled, setting down the glass, with a wry face.

"No matter as to that, just now," lightly returned the proprietor of the Eldorado. "Go ahead with your latest."

"Let me ask, fu'st, ef Saul Temple aire present," said Bridger, roving his eyes over the crowd. "I hev hyar the message, an' it aire important."

"The marshal hain't hyar," spoke up a voice in the crowd. "But ye kin look fer him at eny minute."

"Then, ter get back ter my yarn. Cap'n Noname an' his men slid back inter ther bush, an' with ther unfortunate critters inside cavortin', at a rate thet threatened ter raise ther roof ov ther huss, we laid on whip fer Nabob's Bar."

"Ther trail aire rough et thet p'int, an' et took all my eyes ter pilot the machine. W'en ther trail opened out ag'in, I turned ter ask ther tenderfoot on the box w'y he kept so still."

"Ther seat war empty—he war gone!"

"I sized the matter up putty quick. He hed bin in on ther hold-up game, an' hed 'dropped off ahind ter slide back an' j'ine his pards."

"But, et ther same time, I looked ter see thet ther galoots in ther huss was safe, fer I c'u'dn't take chances on w'at ther tenderfoot mought hev done."

"Puzzled my head an' a mighty sight, did these hyar two or three leetle sarcumstances, an' I reckon I wasn't es watchful es I sh'u'd 'a' bin; least-ways, 'bout a mile an' a half further on, in roundin' ther sharp curve under ther Hangin' Rock, w'at d'd we do but run up slap-bang ag'in a barricade thrown up acrost the trail!"

"An' over that barricade p'inted a ha'f-score Winchester, grupp'd by as many gents ov ther highway—Greasers, neegers an' low-down white trash, sech fellers as 'u'd make ther boss chick ov ther pit y'arn fer a roost on a barn top ov a dark night!"

"Most afore I knowed et, ther hosses war back on ther ha'nches, w'ile a dozen more ov ther cusses war a-swarmin' over ther huss."

"An' Lordes! w'ot a howl went up w'en they opened ther door ov ther old vehike an' see'd ther lay-out inside!"

"Et didn't take ther gents long ter find ther meat in ther pot hed bin scooped by ther galoot stylin' hisself Cap'n Noname, an' then ther air 'as blue."

"Ther hull cargo inside war filed out an' s'arched, a'ter which ther linin' ov ther stage war ripped ter pieces, ther seats torn out, an' even ther runnin'-gear an' ther harness looked a'ter without raisin' a red."

"Upshot ov the matter war thet Miss Axfell war bundled back inter ther huss, w'ile ther toll-takers, 'ith a cuss-word or two et yours truly, put off in ther bush 'ith ther other five passe'gers, leaving me ter git over ther barricade ther best I c'u'd."

"Now comes ther queer part ov ther hull business—Cap'n Noname wore about his sombrero, as I hev told you, the stuffed skin ov a prairie rattler, fixed in place by a red dagger; now each one ov this second band, whom ther leader interduced as the Serpents ov Cimarron, bore edactly ther same sign!"

Old Buck Bridger paused a moment, apparently to note the effect of his strange revelation. Then, as no one vouchsafed a remark or a comment, he went on:

"And now ye know all thar aire ter know—unless ye putt a'ter ther cusses an' run them down—not sech a hard matter, sence they're 'most likely but a few miles back."

"W'en et came ter gitting rid ov ther barricade, Miss Axfell cut an' worked right alongside Old Buck—"

"Hallo! hallo! hyar's 'ther major now, an' with him old Saul Temple!"

"Right you are, my hearty!" promptly returned one of the two men who had just entered the door of the Eldorado. "'Speak of the Old Boy,' etc."

"Major Axfell informs me that you have a message fer me, Bridger."

"I hev thet same, Saul Temple, though them ow-dashus helyons, ther Serpents ov Cimarron, actin' on a pointer from ther cusses in ther huss, s'arched me from crown ter heel, then reckoned I hed dropped et. Hyar et aire."

And plucking one of his trusty "sixes" from his broad leathern belt, Bridger gingerly extracted a twisted wisp of paper from the long barrel, and passed it to Marshal Temple, who had pushed his way through the crowd, closely followed by Major Axfell.

"A quick wit that prompted you to conceal it there, Buck, for truly it would be a man of iron nerve who would care to look into the muzzle of such a tool, even for a document far more important than

this may prove to be," observed the latter, as Saul Temple smoothed the sadly-crumpled bit of paper.

Then, as the redoubtable marshal ran his cold gray eyes over the message, a hush fell upon the restless crowd. To the right of Bridger stood Idaho and the hunchback side by side, the former with his arms folded carelessly across his massive chest, his face bearing a strangely-mocking smile, the latter with a cruel, sneering expression upon his sinister visage; to the left, on the outskirts of the crowd and just within the doorway, were Elegant Fitz Jim and his friend Hank, each quiet and expectant, fully on the alert.

"An odd chick in his brood, this Captain Noname seems to be," commented Temple, as he finished his perusal of the message. "From Major Axfell and his daughter I have heard the full particulars of the capture and robbers of the stage, and I must confess that to the best of my knowledge the case stands without a parallel."

"The impudence of the rascal is simply astounding."

"Listen, and I will read you his remarkable mis- sive, which relates wholly to the five victims whom he handcuffed, and who were afterward kidnapped from the stage by the Serpents of Cimarron."

Amid a profound silence, the agent of the law read as follows:

"SAUL TEMPLE, MARSHAL OF NABOB'S BAR:—

"Herewith, per Buck Bridger, I send, for deliver-ance into your custody, five red handed criminals, namely: Carlotta Dane, alias Lisette Cremola, alias Captain Redblade, alias Priscilla Trueheart, the chief of the notorious New Mexican outlaw band, known as the Serpents of Cimarron; and Sweetwater Smith, Peter Peaslee, Nicholas Jolly and Doctor Skaggs, all members of the said band."

"May the court of good Judge Lynch decree that they be hung high as Haman, for such a fate they truly deserve."

CAPTAIN NONAME."

"Now you have heard what this embodiment of nerve—this outlaw chief—has to say," uttered the marshal, as he carefully placed the bit of paper in his wallet. "What do you think of it?"

"I think that the scoundrel's arrest of the five passengers is an outrage that must not be allowed to go unpunished!" quickly declared a harsh, sibilant voice, immediately behind Temple and Major Axfell. "From all that I have heard of the matter, the most plausible theory that I can conceive is, that Captain Noname and his crew and the Serpents of Cimarron are all one, and that long before the hearse left Golconda, they knew when and where to strike."

"And more—I believe that the capture of the stage was a bootless affair, and that they knew from the start that such would be the case, but acted in pursuance to plans cunningly concocted by men of high standing in Nabob's Bar!"

These words, accentuated with venomous bitterness, and plainly intended for Major Axfell and Saul Temple, created a pronounced sensation, almost drowning the powerful voice of the giant gambler as he cried:

"My sentiments exactly, Rufus Darnley, though we two are not the best of friends. And I will go a step further—the entire plot was hatched to create a sort of public sympathy for a certain unfortunate individual whose name, for the sake of politeness, I will omit, and as an opening wedge to a stay in the foreclosure proceedings impending against the Great Mozul Mine!"

Then came a sudden surging of the crowd, accompanied by all sorts of sounds from scornful hisses to deep-breathed curses—a sudden pairing-off, a division into two factions—the recognized elements of the camp.

His pale-blue eyes filled with an ominous glitter, a hectic flush in each white, shrunken cheek, his thin nostrils dilated and quivering, his slight, attenuated form erect and rigid and for the moment imbued with savage strength, his hands resting upon the solid butts of his half-drawn revolvers, Major Axfell wheeled, with a fierce imprecation, from Idaho to Rufus Darnley.

"Scoundrel! you—"

"Steady, now, Axfell!" broke in sturdy Saul Temple in a tone of expostulation, as his strong hand fell lightly but firmly upon the shoulder of his friend. "Remember, for your own sake, that this is neither the time nor the place for a settlement of certain vexed questions between yourself and that gentleman—there."

And as the old marshal spoke his cold, clear gray eyes were fixed in a steady, wondering, piercing sort of stare upon the heavy and sensual yet undeniably handsome face of Rufus Darnley, noting at once the gleam of triumph in his large, slightly-protruberant black orbs, and the cruel, malicious smile upon his full red lips.

"Remember, Axfell," Temple continued, "that no matter what may be said, the facts remain the same; remember, that while we parley here we are losing time that should be devoted to organizing a party to go at break of day in pursuit of Captain Noname, to wrest from him his ill-gotten spoils."

Then, ere another word could be spoken on either side, a tall, athletic-looking fellow, whose clothing, though of fine texture, was torn and covered with dust and dirt, roughly jostled his way through the outer ranks of the crowd and with a bound planted himself before the open doorway, a weapon in each hand.

"Ho! thar! marshal!" he cried sharply, his keen black eyes quickly singling out the tall form of Saul Temple. "Ye speak ov Captain Noname, the outlaw! Do yer duty, an' by the Lord ov Israel! ye shall hev him, an' not a cent ter pay, fer thar he stands—ther cuss 'ith ther bright blue eyes an' long

gray ha'r—ter yer right thar—dressed in black, 'ith ther diamond in his shirt-front, an' high silk hat! Thar aire ther man! Captain Redblade, ov ther Serpents ov Cimarron!"

A shifting of the crowd; a wild commotion; a sharp rattling, as of a hundred hands dropped swiftly upon belted weapons. Then a dark form shot out from the ranks of the crowd, as if hurled from a catapult alighting with back squarely against the wall, blue eyes glittering, and revolvers out and up, ready for action quick and deadly!

"Perdido Fernandez, you lie! I am no more Captain Redblade, ov the Serpents ov Cimarron, than air old Saul Temple thar!"

"Gents ov Nabob's Bar, permit me—I am plain, onvarnished, unpretentious Cactus Burr, Esq., ov Hard Luck! Shall I kem to ye, or will ye kem an' take me?"

CHAPTER XI.

A VILLAIN'S PROPOSITION.

WITH the utmost coolness spoke the man from Hard Luck, slowly, deliberately, his smooth voice expressive neither of fear nor of anger, while his face betrayed no sign of any unusual degree of excitement.

On the contrary, his round red lips wore just a suspicion of a smile, as if he looked upon the entire matter as being of the nature of a stupendous joke.

But by far the greater number of the "Barbarians"—as the citizens of the older and rival camp of Golconda were wont to term the denizens of Nabob's Bar—were by no means deceived by the careless attitude of this free-and-easy individual thus suddenly and dramatically brought into prominence.

Intuitively, they felt that in this slight, smiling fellow, Cactus Burr, Esq., they had run upon a customer dangerous to "fool" with—a peculiar yet pronounced, type of the "bad man from 'way back."

The fearless flash of the bright blue eyes, that strangely soft and gentle smile, the easy poise of the slender, well-knit form, the rock-like steadiness of the hands gripping the brace of fine self-cocking revolvers—all these things were possessed of a significance which they had cause to know, and learned to respect.

Then, too, the inactivity of Major Axfell, Saul Temple, Rufus Darnley, Idaho and Elegant Fitz Jim—the leading lights of the camp—went far to hold the body of the motley crowd in check.

Therefore, it is not to be wondered at that a moment of intense silence followed the delivery of the quaintly couched challenge of the man from Hard Luck.

A slight movement upon the part of Old Buck Bridger—a writhing and twisting of his lank form, until he was seated upon the bar—then:

"Galumphin' stars! et's me outside, jasse'ger, or I'm a Rocky Mountain goat!" he gasped, staring hard at the man in the doorway, a look of blankest incredulity upon his honest face. "Now, Pard Perdido, aire I drunk or crazy, or hes ye swapped togs 'ith some bummer ov ther Bar?"

"I hev follered thet cussed sharp over rocks an' through bresh," hotly retorted the sport, his eyes flaming with rage, as he indicated Burr with a swift inclination of his head. "Marshal, do yer duty, fer thar stands yer man—Captain Redblade, otherwise Captain Noname! I kin sw'ar et, fer I dropped off ther stage, follered his trail till I came upon his camp, then dogged his steps right inter Nabob's Bar! Ef—"

A mellow laugh rippled softly from the lips of the man from Hard Luck, breaking in upon Perdido's impassioned utterances and causing him to stop with teeth hard shut.

"My dear Perdido, ter put et mildly ye aire a wonderful romancer—or, es ther French say, mebbe et's only rats in yer garret. Who knows? Et eny rate, et's absurd ter talk ov my bein' Captain Redblade, ov ther Serpents ov Cimarron! Can't ye see thar hain't a man hyar who believes et? Ther galoots ov Nabob's Bar aire level-headed sinners! Why! thar hain't a man ov 'em lifted a finger sence I introduced myself!"

And again the mocking laugh of Cactus Burr, Esq., rung out, together with his sneering words stinging many to the quick. But there was something—perhaps the lack of a leader to lead the rush, or, again, the mute but effective persuasion in the frowning muzzles playing first here, then there, upon the crowd—which held the restless "Barbarians" in check.

"Permit me to say, Mr. Burr, that we are by far too fair-minded to adjudge you, or even to attempt to arrest or detain you, upon so serious a charge, when the accusation has been made by a perfect stranger—one, too, who seems inimical to you," said Rufus Darnley, in an unctuous tone as he lifted his soft white hands from the gold butts of his weapons and strode forward, a peculiar smile upon his face.

"At all events, the arrest cannot be made within the walls of the Eldorado," chimed in the giant gambler, with a defiant glance at Saul Temple and his friend, Major Axfell.

"I should say nay!" added Elegant Fitz Jim, casting a swift searching look at the face of his employer, then fixing his eyes in an intent stare upon the livid countenance of Perdido Fernandez. "If there is a grudge between the galoots, let them wait until the moon rises and then go out and have it out in regulation style. If they wipe out each other, then with the carrion of the Honorable Diamond Dick the professional mourners of the camp should have material enough to enable them to squeeze out a flood of tears of volume sufficient to allay the present drouth. Verily good may come of all evil!"

By way of retort, the hunchback contented himself with a crisp nod and a significant smile.

"A truce to this nonsense, gentlemen," said Saul Temple, sternly. "Since Idaho has decreed that the arrest shall not take place in the Eldorado, I shall not bring on a conflict by attempting it. Whether or not the man is guilty of the crime with which he is charged I know not; but until he is proven innocent I shall look upon him as Captain Redblade, or Noname."

"If he attempts to hold secret communication with any one while in the Eldorado, he shall be shot down; when he leaves the place, arrest awaits him."

"Major, let us go; I wish to see you in private."

And the two men strode moodily out of the place, accompanied by Perdido Fernandez.

In the starlight the three men laid their course toward the northern confines of the camp.

Halting a hundred paces from the Eldorado, in a broad glare of light from a saloon window, the marshal smoothed out a crumpled bit of paper, and read the following, scrawled thereon in pencil:

"SAUL TEMPLE:—If you are the friend of Major Axfell in his unequal struggle against the Kingpin and his minions, you will make no attempt to arrest the man styling himself Cactus Burr, Esq. Keep him under surveillance if you will, but leave him at liberty."

"Humph! anonymous!" sentimentally muttered the marshal, dropping the strange message into his capacious wallet.

Meanwhile Perdido, too, was perusing a document of the same nature.

It ran thus:

"PERDIDO FERNANDEZ:—Your cause is the height of folly. Leave Cactus Burr to his own devices. Quit the camp, or exercise the greatest caution, for already a plot is on foot which promises death to you. WALKING DEATH, THE LEPER."

"Great God! that man here!" ejaculated the sport, starting back as if confronted by some hideous apparition. "Now, indeed, must I be on my guard, for his words of warning are never vain!"

A moment of unbroken silence had followed the exit of Major Axfell, Saul Temple, and Perdido Fernandez from the Eldorado, the eyes of the crowd noting each move, however slight, of the man from Hard Luck.

He remained with his back to the wall, a ready weapon in each hand, an odd twinkle in his bright blue eye, the cool, almost insolent smile upon his ruddy, boyish face deepening, if varying at all.

"Heigho!" he at length ejaculated, his tone one of mock solemnity. "What a plight is this! 'Tis for liberty, sweet liberty I pine!"

Then Idaho, the giant gambler, strode forward, a brace of heavy self-cocking revolvers in his hands, and faced the expectant crowd.

"Now listen, gents, for I am about to warble business," he slowly enunciated, as his half-closed eyes swept over the array of faces. "You have heard the stranger here accused of being a wolf in sheep's clothing, or something of the sort."

"I deny the assertion, and defy our worthy marshal to find proof that will convict this man Burr."

"Who made the charge against him? An avowed enemy, who, for all we know to the contrary, may himself be Redblade the outlaw!"

"The truth is simply this, gentlemen:

"Cactus Burr is inimical to the interests of Axfell, Temple & Co. in their struggle to retain possession of the Great Mogul Mine; and, knowing this, they have plotted to remove him by deliberate murder!"

"A strong statement, my friends, but the proof of its truth is found in Saul Temple's command to his followers: 'If he attempts to hold secret communication with any one while in the Eldorado, he shall be shot down; when he leaves the place, arrest awaits him.'"

"Is it not true that he must remain as motionless as a block of stone, not daring to move, even to give himself up, lest his purpose be willfully misconstrued as an excuse for filling his cabeza full of lead?"

"But for once the plotters of the Great Mogul have been too cunning by far; and, instead of concealing their object, have made it plain."

"Were there any reason to believe Cactus Burr guilty of the crime with which he is charged, I would be among the foremost to demand that due punishment be meted out to him."

"I am authorized by our friend here, Rufus Darnley, to state that, if his espionage of Mr. Burr be lifted, he himself will stand responsible for any monetary loss or infraction of the laws that may result."

"Isn't the proposition fair enough?"

And as he ceased, Idaho looked complacently over the motley assemblage, then turned his gaze upon the tranquil face of the man from Hard Luck.

A moment of intense silence followed.

Elegant Fitz Jim moved restlessly behind the two arch conspirators, eager to act, yet held in abeyance by the knowledge that his every move was being narrowly watched.

His eyes met those of his ally Hank, in a stealthy glance. Then the latter glided forward, and in smooth, even tones said:

"Fair? Perfectly! Saul Temple himself could not object to such terms. Is it not so, gents?"

The murmur of dissatisfaction welling up from the lips of the marshal's stanch followers was completely drowned by an assenting roar from the Kingpin faction, which, headed by Rufus Darnley

and the giant gambler, surged forward and densely surrounded the man from Hard Luck.

A moment. Then a sudden swaying to and fro of the inner ranks of the crowd; a shuffling of feet, the sharp bang of a door violently closed, and Cactus Burr, Esq., was lost to the gaze of the Barites.

"I am truly glad to find myself in such congenial company, for I assure you, my dear sirs, that it is more than mere relief—it is genuine pleasure—to throw off the vesture for the nonce and appear in my real *personnel*, as—well, as Cactus Burr, Esq., in his proper person!"

And the man from Hard Luck laughed lightly as his big blue eyes stared quizzically into the faces of the two men seated opposite to him at the table—Rufus Darnley, the so-called Kingpin of Nabob's Bar, and Idaho, the giant gambler!

"Cactus Burr!—an odd name that," observed Darnley, exhaling a cloud of smoke from his pursed-up lips, after which very deliberate proceeding he allowed an insinuating smile to steal across his brutishly-handsome face. "I fear that you have been a sad dog, Cactus—that, in common with a large percentage of the camp's population, you have laid upon a shelf, somewhere in the dim and musty past, the cognomen bestowed upon you in the baptismal rite."

"Who knows?" quoth the man from Hard Luck, carelessly, as he lit a fresh cigar. "But, seriously, it is the only handle I answer to. My genealogy is so brief that I can scarcely refrain from giving it."

"Five years ago a party of gold-hunters, crossing a desert plain in New Mexico, came upon the apparently lifeless form of a man lying in the cacti. Investigation proved that the fellow was alive, with a good chance of recovery, if cared for."

"And you are the man?" interrogated Idaho.

"I am the man," was the reply. "But for the life of me, I couldn't tell who I was, or whence I came; so one of the party, in a whimsical mood, dubbed me Cactus Burr, Esq., of Hard Luck, and the appellation has clung to me more tenaciously than any other *burr* I ever encountered."

"A strange yarn, with the additional merit of brevity," dryly commented Darnley. "But tell us, Burr, were you ever before in Nabob's Bar?"

"Nay—and with an hour's start out of the camp, I'll hie me hence forever; for I give it out straight and solid, gents, that one experience like this of to-night is enough for me."

"On the whole, I am sorry to hear of your determination to leave," said Darnley, flicking an ash-flake from his broadcloth coat. "You are a man of sand, Cactus Burr, and such men are in demand just now, at their own price, provided they are not over-scrupulous as to their duties."

Figuratively speaking, the man from Hard Luck pricked up his ears.

"Perhaps I could be induced to tarry yet awhile," he suggested lightly, a strange, half-mocking smile creeping over his ruddy face.

Rufus Darnley stared curiously across the table, just a trace of suspicion visible in his expression.

"Well, we will see," he uttered, coldly. "That you may understand what would be required of you, I will give you the present status of affairs in Nabob's Bar, and point out wherein my interests are at stake."

"Whether or not you accept my proposition, I went it understood that all passing between us is in strict confidence; violate that confidence, and—well, the Captain Noname of the Golconda trail never again shall eat or drink, for he shall start at once upon his dreary pilgrimage across the river Styx!"

"A cheerless prospect for the genial captain, truly," murmured the man from Hard Luck, his blue eyes opening wide. "But for the life of me, gents, I can't see what that galoot has to do with the case in hand!"

"We understand that," uttered Darnley, with a significant smile.

"That we do!" supplemented Idaho, winking furiously. "No use to beat the devil around a stump, Cactus, me boy! May luck go with you in handling Axfell's ducats!"

Staring at the two plotters as if he doubted their sanity, the man from Hard Luck uttered a malicious little laugh.

"Be it so, if you will have it that way," he said, his voice low and mocking. "Were I a saint direct from the celestial sphere, you fellows would have me an imp of darkness!"

A cynical nod, and Rufus Darnley went on:

"This camp, christened Nabob's Bar, from the supposed richness of its mines, is divided into two factions, numerically almost equal, each of which has a recognized head or leader—Major Axfell being one of these enviable luminaries, myself the other."

"The split is of recent origin, and came about in this wise:

"Until six months ago I owned the two principal mines of the camp—the Kingpin and the Great Mogul; but, discovering that the latter was a losing investment, I disposed of it to a tenderfoot of limited means—Major Axfell."

"No matter as to the means used to accomplish the sale; suffice it, that the price was a good round one, even for the indications in sight."

"From which I am to infer that the mine was salted?" queried the man from Hard Luck, with the utmost coolness.

"Nothing of the sort, my dear sir," curtly returned the Kingpin. "No such means were resorted to to effect a sale. Axfell bought the Great Mogul with his eyes open, and recent developments go to prove that he builded even better than he knew."

"Twenty thousand dollars was the purchase price

—ten thousand down, the remaining half in five months, secured by mortgage on the premises."

"Naturally, I suspected nothing else than that at the end of the five months the tenderfoot would be disgusted with his mining experience and let the property go by default. On the contrary, he associated with himself men of experience in such matters, and now I find, through spies in my employ, that by the sale I lost countless thousands; for deep in the drift new 'leads' have been struck—richer far in yellow wealth than any ever pictured even in my wildest dreams."

"I see! I see! You wish to regain the mine!" exclaimed Cactus Burr, Esq., a thrill of excitement noticeable in his usually steady tones. "But why not foreclose the mortgage? The last payment must be a month overdue."

"So it is; but the scheming devils have discovered—or claim to have done so—a flaw in *my* title to the property, and I am forced to await the decision of the courts before I can push the matter to an issue."

"But I am morally sure that they anticipate a decision adverse to their interests, for in the stage from Golconda, to-day, was a package containing \$10,000, for the final payment on the Great Mogul."

"Then a kind Providence has decreed that this redoubtable Captain Noname be the instrument by which your ends are served!" ejaculated the man from Hard Luck, with an ill-concealed sneer.

"Leaving Providence out of the question, it was a fortunate thing for me that the toll takers made their appearance on the Golconda trail to-day, for this \$10,000 is the last shot in Major Axfell's locker," observed Darnley complacently.

"And it was a lucky chance too, that led to your being accused of being Captain Noname, for it instantly suggested to me a plot whereby I might easily ascertain exactly what Axfell and his party are doing in the matter."

"I have said that the camp is divided into two factions, one siding with Axfell, the other with myself."

"Now, what I want you to do is to make yourself solid with the Axfell crew, and this is how I propose for you to do it:

"I will provide you with a roll containing \$10,000. An hour hence, you will go to Major Axfell's quarters at Limerick's Palace, and request an interview. You will state that you are Cactus Burr, or whomsoever you please; that while in Golconda, you overheard a plot to 'hold up' the hearse at a certain point on the trail to Nabob's Bar; that you concluded to checkmate the robbery by making a timely descent upon the stage; that you accomplished your plan; that you have called to deliver up to him the \$10,000; and so on and so forth, with an end to gaining his good-will and confidence."

"Ere you can leave the room, a sudden descent of masked men will be made, overpowering the two of you, and making way with the lucre, but leaving you high in the graces of the major."

"No matter if you wipe out one or two of the fellows—a little blood spilled will put you the higher in Axfell's estimation."

"Now, what say you? Will \$1,000 tempt you to work the racket?"

And the plotter paused, eagerly awaiting an answer.

Cactus Burr, Esquire, sat quite still for a moment, a strange glow in his blue eyes, a peculiar smile parting his red lips. Then he said:

"Your plot is wonderfully true to life, Rufus Darnley. But there is one thing you forget—how can I elude the agents of Saul Temple and leave the Eldorado?"

"Pooh!" ejaculated the Kingpin. "How did you get up here? Trust me to get you through the Temple lines unmolested. Come, now—give us your answer."

The man from Hard Luck slowly arose, a look of resolve upon his boyish face.

"My answer is, that—"

Crack—crack—crack!

A perfect fusillade of pistol-shots rung out down-stairs, cutting short his words, and bringing the two plotters to their feet with alarm plainly depicted upon their faces.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SILENT TONGUES' MISSION.

SITUATE in a wild, rough section of Colorado, and having direct communication with the outer world over the Golconda trail only, Nabob's Bar was a typical gold-camp, both in appearance and in the character of her ten-score denizens.

Slab shanties and canvas tents, here a dug-out and there a wickiup—the first for the prosperous, the last for the poverty-ridden—studded the banks of a slow, sluggish stream dotting the narrow level, and perched upon the abrupt slope of the foot-hill on either side, without the slightest semblance of regularity or regard to street-lines, were the habitations of the nomadic gold-seekers.

Centrally located, but upon opposite banks of the stream, were the Eldorado and Limerick's Palace, principal gambling-hall and hostelry, respectively—large barn-like structures, in the erection of which architectural talent had by no means been lavishly employed, yet institutions to which the eyes of the average Barite turned with pride; for, in the vernacular of the region, "While they warn't es barnsum'es brownstun'an' marble, still they war good enough fer ther galoots ov Nabob's Bar, an' at ther same time laid 'way over anything ov ther kind in ther foothills."

And an odd lot were these same Barites—men, good, bad and indifferent, with the preponderance largely in favor of the second class named.

The two principal mines of the camp—the Great

Mogul and the Kingpin—afforded employment at fair wages to all who chose to accept it. Many there were, however, who preferred delving for the yellow gold "on their own hook," and yet others who toiled not at all, but depended wholly upon their wits.

The feeling of bitter strife and rivalry existing between Major Axfell, of the Great Mogul, and Rufus Darnley, of the Kingpin, had extended to the employees of each, and as a result fights of more or less consequence were of daily occurrence.

So much for the camp, and the state of affairs existing therein.

A few days prior to the dual attack upon the "hearse" of Old Buck Bridger, there had appeared in Nabob's Bar, late one afternoon, a squad of six men—burly, rough-looking fellows, afoot, but rather well-clad and armed to the teeth, and purporting to be gold seekers.

Who they were, or whence they came, proved too much even for the most patiently inquisitive of the Barites, for they held themselves aloof, and, when by chance thrown into contact with the denizens of the camp, were close-mouthed unto surliness.

And so it came about that these mysterious strangers were dubbed "The Silent Tongues, or No Man's Camp," and the quaint appellation bid fair to stick.

These Silent Tongues had pitched their camp and thrown up a large wickup in an isolated spot in the southwest quarter of Nabob's Bar, directly upon the bank of the creek and above a large, deep pool.

For two or three days the new-comers and their frail habitation were kept under a suspicious surveillance by the denizens of the Bar, without regard to faction or clan. Fully aware that their every move was under jealous eyes, the Silent Tongues took things quite coolly, staying close by their quarters, save a detail of two, who each morning appeared at the general store, run in connection with Limerick's Palace, and purchased the day's supplies, paying therefor in virgin dust.

Then, just as it had begun, the watchfulness ceased, and the Silent Tongues settled down to plot their deviltry unmolested.

For they were in the gold-camp upon a mission of wrong-doing—to accomplish a deed bold, yet dark and terrible.

At about the hour Perdido Fernandez so suddenly appeared at the Eldorado, two men approached the wickup of the Silent Tongues, coming from the direction of the Golconda trail, and were met with the challenge:

"Hold, pard! Give an account ov yerselves!"

In tones guarded but stern and menacing, came the words, from a man sitting upon the creek bank, directly before the entrance to the shelter, and in the lurid glow from his short black pipe gleamed a pair of revolvers drawn and leveled.

Instantly came the response:

"We aire strangers—friends ter honest men, foes ter all others!"

The sentry lowered his weapons, thrust them into his belt, then removed his pipe from his mouth, saying calmly:

"Ter such ther latch-string ov the honest miner aire allers out. Ye will find friends inside."

With an exclamation expressive of satisfaction, the foremost of the two men lifted the blanket serving as a door to the wickup, and glided inside, leaving his companion with the sentry.

On the interior of the dimly-lighted shelter, seated at opposite sides of a high, flat rock, were two men, a pack of cards and a bottle before them.

"Parson Paul, fer half ther world!"

At the deep-toned voice, the two men sprung to their feet.

"Bravo Brice!" they exclaimed, in a breath.

"Yas, Bravo Brice, pard—tired, hungry, played out from A to Izzard, but ready fer work ther promises ducats," was the response of the redoubtable outlaw, as he sunk wearily beside the rock.

Not a whit less ugly, nor a shade cleaner or neater in appearance than when last we saw him, was the iron-nerved lieutenant of the Serpents of Cimarron.

His swarthy face was beaded with perspiration and he was breathing hard, as if from an arduous walk.

"Whar's ther band?" queried the outlaw addressed as Parson Paul, resuming his seat and pushing the bottle toward his leader.

"In ther brush, a mile back," returned Bravo Brice, after a liberalotation. "Whar's t'other boyees?"

"Ye passed Jim Murty es ye kem in, I reckon. Jaques, ther Thug, aire doin' time ont'other side. High-Card Hank an' ther Gypsy Gent aire up at ther Bar, layin' ther ropes fer ther swipe. An' Leatherskin—" a short nod at his companion at cards completed the sentence.

"Have ye seen ther captain?"

"No."

Bravo Brice laughed—a grating, rasping sound by no means pleasant to hear.

"Then keep out ov his way till ye've su'thin' good fer his ears," he advised. "Things hev gone rough 'ith ther dainty cuss ter-day, an' ye bet he aire in a rage."

"Gone rough? How, pard?"

The outlaw lieutenant was silent a moment.

"Ter answer ther question, I'll hev ter go back an' look over this Axfell job from ther time we tackled it," he at length replied. "Ye know, Parson Paul, how we left New Mexico 'bout ther captain, an' how we got word ter push fer Golconda, lickety-split. An' I reckon et aire not new ter ye w'at we done a'ter we got thar."

"Lay in ther brush an' waited—ther war all?" interpolated the outlaw Leatherskin—a shrill, piping sort of voice.

"Right," assented Bravo Brice; "but ther captain war et work, all ther same, an' we never putt in a

day 'thout word from him. An' we c'u'd afford ter wait, fer w'en Old Nick Jolly, Doc Skaggs, Sweetsie Smith an' Poker Pete—ther four boss deviltry-hatchers ov ther band—war sent on ter Nabob's Bar—we all know'd thet ther game bein' played war ter high stakes."

"Ter steal a gal!" sniffed Leatherskin.

"Yes, ter abduct Major Axfell's darter, fer whose ransom \$10,000 w'u'd hev ter be paid," calmly continued Bravo Brice. "An'—"

"We laid thar in ther brush, a-waitin', fer three mortal weeks, w'en we c'u'd 'a' swooped down on ther camp et any time an' snucked ther gal off atween two days, jes' es we did ther kid afore, et Golconda," broke in Leatherskin, irritably, a scowl on his cadaverous face as he restlessly shuffled the pack of cards.

"So we all thought, until after Parson Paul hyer and you fellers had packed traps fer Nabob's Bar," retorted the outlaw lieutenant, with an evil smile. "Ef the mere stealin' ov ther gal war all, we c'u'd 'a' hiked her off through ther brush ter-day, fer she war plum-center in our grasp."

Parson Paul started sharply.

"Ther Sarpents held up ther hearse ter-day?" he queried.

"Es ter thet—I'll tell ye later," replied Bravo Brice. "An' you gerloots set yer teeth on yer tongues an' keep quiet, fer I hev a good deal ter say."

"Ther day a'ter you fellers left Golconda, a sweet yon female critter callin' herself Priscilla Trueheart kem a-sailin' inter our camp, an' asked fer Mr. Brice."

"An' thet female war Captain Redblade, in disguise."

"W'at he said that day putt a diff'rent light on ther natur' ov our doin's. 'Stead ov workin' fer a \$10,000 ransom, we war booked fer ther biggest strike one record!"

"Ye see et war jest like this: Ther Sarpents war not goin' et on they're own hook, but war a-fightin' ag'in' one gold-bag, an' fer another!"

"Snow-capp'd Rockies! I see ther game—we aire fer Rufe Darnley, ov ther Kingpin Mine, ag'in' Maje Axfell, ov ther Great Mogul!" excitedly exclaimed Parson Paul.

"Prezactly," assented Brice. "Darnley wishes ter crush out Axfell an' regain possession ov ther Great Mogul Mine, an' he hes set ther Sarpents ter work ter do the fust act on ther programme."

"Ter do this, ther Sarpents w'u'd hev ter devise ways an' means ter squeeze from Axfell every dollar he c'u'd raise with which ter make ther last payment on the Great Mogul."

"Captain Redblade's first idear war ter kidnap ther gal an' break ther old man by extortin' ransom money. An' so Old Nick Jolly an' his pards war sent on ter worm ther way inter his good graces an' get ther lay ov ther land. A'ter thet, you fellers war sent hyer fer ter be in readiness ter yak her out ov camp es soon es ther dust kem fer ther payment."

"But sarcumstances alt-ered ther case, fer Jolly found thet on a sart'in day ther gal herself was ter go ter Golconda an' fetch ther lucre."

"An' ef we c'u'd get ther coin by hol'in' up ther hearse, thar' war ho need ter kidnap ther gal," observed Parson Paul.

"Jes' so," acquiesced the lieutenant. "An' ther day before ther gal war due in Golconda, Old Nick an' his pards showed up at ther camp, an' ther hull thing war mapped out. So w'en Miss Axfell started fer Nabob Bar with ther stuff, she hed fer feller-passegers Priscilla Trueheart, an' them four rattle-brained old sinners, Old Nick & Co."

"Ther captain hed it all arranged fer ther Sarpents to hold up ther stage at a sart'in pint. Old Nick war ter gain possession ov ther wealth, an' he war ter be ther fust one held up; then ef things went wrong, we c'u'd cut our lucky quick."

"Oh, et war all jest es scrumptious es everything c'u'd be, an' ther dust war jest es good es in our han's, when out from ther roadside, 'ithin a mile ov ther spot named by ther captain, pops a toll-taker, dressed fer all ther world like a genuine Cimarron Sarpent, with his guns up in proper style, an' stops ther hearse es ef a bolt ov lightnin' hed bit et."

"An' ther gang war so dead sure that everything war straight, thet, fore they c'u'd diskiwer thet ther galoot in ther road war not theyre man, Old Nick guy et away thet he hed secured ther dust!"

"An' ter cut ther matter short, fore they c'u'd decide w'at ter do, this cool gen'leman ov ther highway, Captain Nonsense, riddles ther entire party, from Old Buck Bridger down, ov every ounce in theyre weasel-skins, an' then plays ther measliest trick ov all—han'cuffs ther Sarpents in ther hearse, Priscilla Trueheart included!"

"Han'cuffed ther gang!" chorused the two outlaws, starting up in mingled amazement and consternation.

"That's w'at I said," coolly continued the villain Brice. "Han'cuffed ther five ov them, then sent ther hearse onward, giving Bridger a note ov some kind fer ther Marshal ov Nabob's Bar."

"Ther deuce!" Leatherskin ejaculated in unmistakable alarm. "Sech bein' ther case, I'll bid ther camp good-by ter wunst!"

"Drop, an' keep quiet, or ye'll not git far away fore su'thin' else goes off—su'thin' thet'll overtake ye!" uttered Brice, sternly, as he plucked a revolver from his belt and laid it upon the stone. "Ther pris'ners ner ther message never reached ther marshal an' so he kin know nothin' sart'in. Fer when ther hearse reach'd ther sharp bend in ther trail whar we had bin stationed, we reskied Redblade an' his men, an' no amount ov s'archin' brought ther note ter light. Bridger must 'a' lost et."

"W'en we found that this Captain Nonsense hed

forestalled us in gittin' ther major's dust, we war fer takin' his daughter, then an' thar, but Redblade war ag'in' et, es sech a move w'u'd interfere with his plans."

"We rustled back ter our camp in ther bresh, an' succeeded in gittin' ther irons off ther boys. Disguisin' themselves, they putt out fer ther Bar."

"On ther way, they war met by a messenger from Darnley, sayin' ef ther hearse hed not yit bin tackled, ter lay in wait an' secure ther gal with ther dust. Ther bird havin' slipped through our fingers, all ther captain c'u'd do war ter send ther messenger on ter our camp, with orders ter me ter join you fellers, an' fer us ter be redy fer work at his signal."

"Darnley hes diskiwered thet ther movements ov himself and his ally, Idaho, aire bein' piped by a spy in ther employ ov Axfell—one Elegant Fitz Jim, a faro-dealer at ther Eldorado. To night, this galoot aire ter be putt out ov ther way, sech a ruction bein' created as will draw ther hull camp, an' so leave ther coast clear fer kidnappin' ov ther gal."

"Ther time set aire w'en ther moon aire an hour high. Ef everything aire in readiness, we hed better—"

Suddenly pausing in the middle of the sentence, the outlaw raised his hand to betoken silence, then bent his head in an attitude of listening.

"Fire-arms!" he enunciated, his eyes filling with a fitful glow. "Ther circus has opened, an' ther t'other ction is at hand. Come, pard! look ter we'pons an' le's ter work!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A RAY OF LIGHT.

THE wild ejaculation uttered by Perdido Fernandez as he finished reading the message of warning from the mysterious Walking Death did not escape the ears of Saul Temple and Major Axfell.

Starting guiltily, the two men exchanged glances. "To what man do you have reference?" inquired Temple, turning to Perdido.

A look of annoyance shot athwart the sport's dark face. A moment he hesitated, then thrust the crumpled paper into the marshal's hand.

"Read that," he muttered, curtly.

Temple complied, then compared the message with that addressed to him.

"Written by the same hand," he avowed. "Who is this Walking Death, Senor—Senor—"

Perdido hesitated strangely a moment, then said: "Call me Axfell—Leonidas Axfell."

The major started as if stung. Staring hard at the importunate face of the sport through the murky light, he shrunk back coldly.

"Axfell—Leonidas Axfell!" he repeated mechanically.

"That is what I said," uttered Perdido, by way of iteration. "Leonidas Axfell, the black sheep of the family, and late of the Ohio Penitentiary."

His voice was full of bitterness.

"We are brothers," said Major Axfell, quietly.

"Brothers be it."

The hands of the two men met in a strong clasp, while Saul Temple looked on in wide-eyed wonder.

A few words from Major Axfell, and the marshal and Perdido were on a friendly footing.

"But who is this Walking Death?" repeated Temple, during a lull in the brief conversation.

The sport related what he knew of the leper.

"All this reminds me that I, too, was the recipient of a secretly delivered message while at the Eldorado," suddenly spoke up Major Axfell; and, drawing a piece of paper from his pocket, he smoothed the wrinkles from it and in the dim light of the window read:

"MAJOR AXFELL:—Return to your room at the Palace, and there await a glad surprise."

"It bears the signature of Elegant Fitz Jim," he added, "and therefore is as good as gold."

A few words more, and then the party separated, with a mutual understanding as to their later actions, Perdido returning to Idaho's Eldorado, while the owner of the Great Mogul with Saul Temple hastened toward Limerick's Palace.

When Perdido crossed the threshold of the gambling hall, the man from Hard Luck was nowhere visible; a perfect quiet hung over the interior of the place, broken at intervals by a chuckle of satisfaction, again by a muttered curse from the crowd about the faro-table whereat sat Elegant Fitz Jim.

It required no second glance from the trained eyes of the sport to determine that a game for heavy stakes was in progress.

The deserted bar—the very quietude of the place, bespoke as much.

Skirting the throng, Perdido at length reached a point whence he pushed his way through to a position at the dealer's left.

Reached that position just as Elegant Fitz Jim wearily laid aside the silver box and in a cold, monotonous voice announced:

"Gents, the bank's bu'sted—the game's ended! Our misshapen friend, Diamond Dick, has succeeded where a thousand others have failed!"

The black eyes of the hunchback glittered nervously. His keen white teeth shut together with a sharp click.

"Fu'st your dust, then your life—"

A grating, snarling cry from Perdido broke in upon the deadly strains of the hunchback's voice. His dark face aflame with rage, his great black orbs fairly glowing, the reckless sport sprung nimbly upon the table, a polished weapon in each hand.

"Curse you for cowardly dogs!" he gritted, instantly sin'ling out two men immediately behind Diamond Dick—one tall and gangling, the other

squat and powerful-looking, with thick, matted red hair and beard.

"Curse you!" he repeated savagely, his revolvers leaping to a level, with hammers poised. "Do you remember the night on the mountain-side, devils, when you dragged me at a rope's end—forced me to submit to treatment such as a Digger Indian would scarcely give a dog?"

Poker Pete—the gangling rough was none other—fumbled nervously at the weapons he dared not draw. His crafty little eyes avoided meeting the burning gaze of the sport, while over his cadaverous face crept a sickly yellow taint.

"Durn et! fang 'im, Sweetsie, or we is gone coons," he articulated in a husky whisper, with a swift side glance at the empurpled visage of his equally villainous confrere. "Cap'n kin do nothin'—Fitz Jim hes got 'im lined!"

Certain it was that the strong white hands of Elegant Fitz Jim gripped the butt of a pair of "sixes," the muzzles of which stared the hunchback, Diamond Dick, full in the face!

The cold smile just visible on the curling red lips of the dealer, as well as the baleful expression of Perdido, warned the throng that a dual vendetta of the deadliest kind would be forever settled within the minute, and it parted right and left, the adherents of Major Axfell forming in one line, those of the owner of the Kingpin in the other.

At the very instant the division took place, Saul Temple and Old Buck Bridger, accompanied by Hank, the dealer's friend, entered the Eldorado.

Ere the three men could get a second glance at the thrilling scene presented, a number of shots rung out rapidly and the lights of the place flickered fitfully and expired.

Simultaneously, a stream of fire leaped from each of Perdido's weapons, and Poker Pete and Sweetwater Smith with smoking revolvers reeled and fell, one across the other, the blood trickling from a bullet-hole in the forehead of each!

Verily, the reckless sport had wiped out his score. "Rally fer ther Kingpin, pard! Down with ther Great Mogul!" shouted a stentorian voice, the flash and crack of a revolver accompanying each word.

The single spark needed to explode the mine of pent-up wrath between the rival factions of the gold-camp had been supplied! The incessant cracking of firearms, the clashing of opposing blades, the yells and curses of the maddened roughs, the groans and cries of the wounded and dying, made the darkened gambling-hell a place of grim horror!

Unseen, the door at the bottom of the stairway leading to the apartment overhead opened cautiously, permitting the giant gambler and Rufus Darnley, and with them the man from Hard Luck to enter.

Idaho and the mine-owner readily grasped the situation—knew that the factional fight they had schemed to bring about was "on" at last and waging with relentless fury.

"Now is your time to escape from the place unmolested," uttered the giant, his mouth close to the ear of Cactus Burr, Esq. "Darnley and a few of the boys will follow you at once, to carry out the job—eh, Rufe?"

"At once," replied the owner of the Kingpin. "I will get the lads together immediately."

As he finished, Darnley glided stealthily away. "Be off—the sooner the better," urged Idaho, as the man from Hard Luck seemed to hesitate. "Everything is fixed—you have the roll in your pocket. Look sharp, or Rufe will reach Limerick's Palace in advance of you."

"One moment, dear sir," uttered Burr, his voice strangely soft and purring, yet spiced with a suspicion of menace. "There is just one question I must ask."

"I have heard it said Major Axfell had a son. Is it true?"

"True? Yes; and a wild young fellow he was—knowing no fear, and daring unto recklessness."

"But that is neither here nor there; for he died with his boots on, full five months ago, in the wilds southwest of Colorado. And it was my hand that struck the blow, for he stood in my way. Yes, the whelp is dead."

There was a ring of pitiless exultation in Idaho's deep base voice.

"You lie!"

The giant gambler sprang back, chilled through and through by the intense, deadly strains of the voice in which the two words were uttered—appalled by the mad glow in the big blue eyes fairly burning in his bearded face!

The right arm of the man from Hard Luck was raised aloft, his hand swinging around and round, in a circle with ever increasing swiftness, producing a sibilant, hissing sound.

"A thousand furies!" gasped the gambler, his great hands dropping swiftly to his belted weapons. "Can this be—"

The hand of Cactus Burr shot forward in a sharp circle, to be as swiftly drawn back, the movement producing a sudden sound, as of a heavy blow, and wringing from the giant a surging, half-stifled cry.

Quivering in every fiber, Idaho reeled blindly to and fro, tearing desperately at his bearded throat, each instant growing weaker and weaker until he dropped in an inert heap on the bloody floor.

The terrible glow in the eyes of the man from Hard Luck deepened until they shone redly in the darkness, while a scream of elfish delight broke from his lips, to ring high above the uproar of the awful conflict raging all around.

An instant he stooped over the lifeless form of the giant, then sprang erect, turned and glided silently out of the gambling-hell.

Onward he plunged in the starlight, apparently at

random. A few paces from the Eldorado he staggered and came near falling. The intense, lurid glow in his big blue eyes rapidly faded and grew dim, while a strange tremor seemed to shake his well-knit form.

Steadying himself, he again pushed forward, a powerful effort marking each step. A dozen yards, then he halted, turning round and round like one utterly bewildered.

A sudden dash of color relieved the deathlike pallor of his strangely drawn and distorted visage. His facial muscles relaxed, and with a low, unearthly wail he flung up his hands and dropped in a senseless heap.

CHAPTER XIV.

CAPTAIN NONAME AGAIN.

THE great harvest moon was just lifting her full, round face above the crests of the hills environing the Colorado gold-camp of Nabob's Bar, pouring through a window in the east side of Limerick's Palace a flood of yellow light and rendering the hallway on the second floor almost as bright as day.

Midway of the hall, clustered before a half-open door straining eye and ear to grasp every detail of the scene transpiring within, were a half score of men.

Rough-looking fellows, masked, and with weapons drawn.

The very silence of the group presaged a deed of violence.

The room into which they peered was a large square apartment, plainly furnished, and lighted by an oil lamp upon a rough table opposite to the door.

Each end of the apartment was cut off by a heavy chintz curtain, reaching almost to the ceiling.

Seated at the table, with his back to the door, was Major Axfell.

Confronting him was no less a personage than the mysterious road-agent, Captain Noname!

The dark orbs of the robber-chief gleamed coldly through the eyelets of his mask. His arms were folded across his chest, carelessly enough so far as appearance went, but each hand clasped the butt of heavy revolver.

"If you have aught to say be quick about it," Axfell was saying, at the moment the men appeared without the door. "You have intimated that you are the man who held up the hearse this afternoon. If you are really and truly Captain Noname, cease beating the devil around the stump and say as much."

The road agent laughed lightly.

"Major, I reckon you and the baldheaded truth are well-nigh utter strangers," he observed, in the coolest way imaginable. "I have told you, not in just so many words, perhaps, but yet very plainly, that I have the somewhat dubious honor of being identical with the boss highwayman of the season, Captain Noname. Got a Bible?"

And with the query the toll-taker lowered his hands and calmly helped himself to a chair.

"Confound your insufferable insolence!" exclaimed Axfell, starting to his feet. "I don't take a particle of stock in your cock-and-bull yarn. In fact, I think you're a fraud, and I've a great mind to pitch you out the window!"

"And what's the matter with the door?" quoted Captain Noname, in a drawing tone. "It is a rare old chestnut, major; but one good turn deserves another, you know."

"But a word in seriousness, major. Sit down and let's talk business. It may bore you terribly, but it will stand you in hand just \$10,000, to a supper. And here's the stuff to back the assertion."

As Captain Noname ceased he flung upon the table a thin packet, carelessly wrapped with paper.

A strange tremor coursed through Major Axfell's slender form. Utterly unnerved, apparently, he dropped into his chair and drew the package toward him.

"Count it now, if you wish," cautioned the masked outlaw. "I'll go bail it's O. K."

Then, as Axfell tore off the wrappers and looked through the wealth of bank bills revealed, he went on:

"Of course, you regard me as a common highway thief, major, and, until I have explained how the lucre came to fall into my hands, no protestations can convince you to the contrary."

"First, let me set myself before you in my proper person. After that, perhaps my tongue will wag more easily."

Even as he spoke, Captain Noname removed his mask and sombrero, allowing a mass of curling, iron-gray hair to descend almost to his shoulders, and revealing the ruddy, clear-cut face of Cactus Burr, Esq., of Hard Luck!

"You recognize me, I see," he observed, with an inclination of his head.

"Now to get at the bottom facts of this much mixed and very remarkable affair."

"For something like two weeks past I have been in the neighboring gold-camp of Golconda. While there I ran across an old acquaintance in the person of Bolly Darrit, of Denver, a member of the Rocky Mountain Detective Association."

"Ah! you know the gentleman? I judged as much."

"Well, he was in disguise—had been for months past. With a fellow-detective, posing as Nicholas Jolly and Doctor Skaggs, respectively, he had worked his way into the good graces of a band of cutthroats known hereabouts as Bludso's Band, and further south, as the Serpents of Cimarron."

"It seemed that, some months before, this band had entrapped and murdered a young fellow near Golconda—the son of some well-to-do mine-owner

here in these hills, and the two detectives had been employed to bring the murderers to justice.

"Your son, you say? Axfell was the name, I believe."

"Well, Dorrit managed to see me yesterday, and put me onto a little job, set up by this same outlaw band, to hold up the hearse between Golconda and Nabob's Bar, and relieve your daughter of the packet here before us."

"He asked me to step in and make off with the booty, and there it is."

"So much for the present, major. In the near future I have another and more cheering word for your ear."

As he ended, Cactus Burr arose.

"Stay!" cried Major Axfell, springing up. "You—"

A swift rush of feet drowned the rest of the sentence, as into the room trooped the men from the hallway.

"It was a neat trick you played, Cactus Burr, but he laughs best who laughs last!" enunciated a cold, hard voice, above the clicking of a half score weapons. "Hands up or die, you hounds! Booty and beauty is our motto to night!"

Thus brought to bay, Major Axfell and his mysterious visitor flung up their hands in compliance with the pointed command.

"The game is up—the play is ended! Ring down the curtain!" cried the man from Hard Luck, an odd smile curling his red lips a mocking light dancing in his big blue eyes.

A peculiar rustling sound followed, and the heavy chintz curtain across each end of the room fell to the floor, disclosing two files of ten men each, headed by Doctor Skaggs and Nicholas Jolly and all armed with leveled Winchesters!

At the same instant, the door closed softly, and the bolt clicked as a key turned in the lock without!

"S'rend-r! ye blasted thieves, or ye'll crowd ther range a-climbin' over!" shouted Old Nick Jolly, his rubicund visage all aglow.

To a man, the entrapped roughs "wilted." Not a thought of resistance entered their heads. Death, too swift and sure, stared them in the face.

"A thousand curses upon you, Axfell, for you have triumphed!" savagely grated the leader of the band, tearing aside his mask and disclosing the rage-distorted features of Rufus Darnley, the owner of the Kingpin.

"But in the hour of your triumph, let me tell you that the struggle for the Great Mogul Mine has cost you even more dearly than you have dreamed, for by that fight you sacrificed the life of your son!"

Major Axfell shuddered.

The smile upon the face of Cactus Burr, Esq., the man from Hard Luck, deepened. Poising his hands, he took off the wig of gray locks, and stood revealed a youth of twenty.

"Taken in and done for Rufus!" he cooed softly.

Major Axfell turned like one electrified.

"Rollo!"

"Father!"

The task of disarming and securing the prisoners had just been completed when the muffled tread of eight slowly-moving men, divided into two equal parties, each of which bore a human form, rung through the hallway.

Straight to the open door of Major Axfell's apartment strode the new-comers, and through, to deposit on the floor their groaning burdens.

No second glance was needed to establish the identity of the stricken men.

They were Perdido Fernandez and Elegant Fitz Jim. The hue of death was upon the face of each.

At sight of the two men, a groan of anguish welled up from the lips of Major Axfell. Sinking upon his knees between them, he exclaimed:

"Leonidas! Jim!"

That was all, but there was a world of pity in the broken voice.

Turning his head until his blue eyes rested full upon the face of the owner of the Great Mogul, the fero dealer, with a faint smile, said:

"Let it be Jim for the last time, major."

"Know me now, as you should have known me from the initial move of this mad game—as the brother of your dead wife—Harold Chetwynd!"

"Harold Chetwynd!" ejaculated Axfell.

"The cursed hound!" groated Perdido, writhing desperately to raise himself.

Rollo Axfell moved forward, saying:

"Hold! There should be no enmity between you and Harold Chetwynd, Leonidas Axfell. A few words, and you will acknowledge that I am right."

"You loved the same woman—an adventuress—knowing her as Lisette Cremola, the other as Carlotta Dane. When her bold game for gold was ended, by an artful intrigue she brought about a bitter quarrel between you two, who had been bosom friends, then fled to her outlaw husband, Rufus Darnley."

"Impossible!" gasped Leonidas Axfell.

"It is true as gospel!" avowed Elegant Fitz Jim in faint tones. "When too late, I discovered her true character—discovered that she had entrapped you into the commission of a felony. Resolved to hunt her down to answer for her blighting work, I followed her West, but lost the trail, and finally established myself on a ranch down in New Mexico."

The look of incredulity fled from Perdido's face. The hands of the two men met in a feeble clasp.

Then turning to Major Axfell, Harold Chetwynd continued:

"A few words more and I am done. It only remains for me to explain why I have been here in disguise."

"Five months ago, a trifle more or less, while, with a friend and my two Hindoo servants, on a hunting expedition in the wilds beyond Golconda, I one day came upon an apparently lifeless form upon the verge of a swift stream.

"The face I at once recognized as that of Rollo Axfell. Branded upon his forehead was a crimson serpent—the mark of the Serpents of Cimarron, of whom I had heard much.

"Wondering how he came there—I knew naught of your presence in Nabob's Bar—I resuscitated him, to find that his past was well-nigh a blank, that his mental state was one bordering on insanity.

"Conveying him to my ranch, I nursed him back to life, and gleaned from his broken murmurings that while in Golconda he had overheard two men plotting against you, and that, while attempting to get a glimpse of their faces, he had been set upon and knocked senseless ere he could recognize his assailants.

"But through his dazed brain seemed to run the idea that Leonidas and Rufus Darnley were the men.

"Leaving Rollo at the ranch, with Hank Hamilton I hastened here, to stumble, blindly, into a realization of the true state of affairs existing between you and Rufus Darnley.

"Concealing my identity, I ingratiated myself partially into the confidence of the rascal, and by means known to ourselves, kept you posted as to many of his artful tricks to regain the Great Mogul Mine.

"To-night, when Cactus Burr made his appearance at the Eldorado, I instantly recognized him as your son, and saw the light of reason in his clear blue eyes.

"The very disguise he wore revealed his identity, for it was one of my stage costumes of former years."

"And in good stead your stage paraphernalia has stood me," said Rollo Axfell, breaking the brief silence following Chetwynd's words. "The make-up of the leper and of the skeleton of fire passed me unharmed through many a trying ordeal, to some of which Uncle Leonidas can testify."

"Shortly after your departure from the ranch, I began to mend rapidly. Two months ago, with Hydrusa and Hydrabad, I took the trail of the Serpents of Cimarron, resolved to avenge the injury inflicted upon me, and to hunt down the plotters who were seeking my father's ruin."

"But what of Carlotta Dane?" queried Perdido, in tremulous tones.

"She is none other than the Captain Redblade, who so nearly hounded you to death. I first learned as much from Bolly Darrit, to whom I owe not a little of my success. Through him, I was enabled to enter the outlaw camp on several occasions. The night you were caught in the canyon, Darrit and myself had succeeded in capturing the woman, and had her in concealment down near the edge of the plain. Disguised as the genuine Captain Redblade, I stood between you and Bravo Brice at the time his lariat parted and you rode away. And speaking of that reminds me that my scalp yet bears the mark of one or more of your bullets.

"In some way, the Dane woman succeeded in escaping from the two Hindoos who had her in charge, and fled across the plain. Thus it was that you met her, and that she was enabled to make you believe she had been a captive in the hands of the Serpents and was then escaping in the dress of the captain. She—"

"She, too, false! The last hope is gone!" and with the low, muttered words the soul of the reckless sport winged its flight.

CHAPTER XV.

CONCLUSION.

JUDGE LYNCH had been sated. Over the hills and into the camp straggled a long line of men, all recounting the events of the past few hours, or speculating as to the future of Nabob's Bar, now that it was rid of its bad element.

In the van were Saul Temple and Bolly Darrit and his partner.

Darrit was saying:

"Look to it that that harum-scarum young devil, Rollo Axfell, doesn't strangle and brand half the camp before he is placed in the hands of a skilled surgeon, Saul. That wound in his head may result in anything, or nothing."

The marshal shrugged his shoulders.

"There's a method in his madness," he observed, dryly. "So long as he employs the cord of the East Indian thug against such men as Idaho, the world will be none the worse off."

"But, seriously, I think the quiet life of the camp will bring him around all right."

"Hello! hello! what have we here?"

"Speak of the Old Boy!" quoth Darrit, as Rollo Axfell stepped into view from behind a jutting rock.

"What brings you here, me laddy-buck?"

"This," and as the youth spoke he half-pushed, half-dragged from the shadow of the rock the form of Diamond Dick, the hunchback.

The three men stared at the lad, nonplused.

"You fail to recognize the gentleman? Well, were the paint removed from his face, the wig from his head, and the artfully contrived hump from between his shoulders, he would stand before you as Captain Redblade, of the Serpents of Cimarron, or as Carlotta Dane, or Priscilla Trueheart—just as you might choose to call him, or her."

"Impossible!" ejaculated Darrit.

"Not at all," coldly avowed the pseudo hunchback. "The boy speaks the truth. I am one and all of the

persons he has named, and as wicked as sin to boot.

"But, little good will the knowledge do you, for even now I am beyond the reach of your vengeance!"

The misguided creature tottered as she spoke, a crimson froth exuding from the corners of her mouth, her face gleaming white and cold in the moonlight.

"Poison! by the Rockies!" exclaimed Saul Temple.

Even so; the woman soon dropped to the ground, and writhing a few moments in agony soon reposed in the stillness of death.

A few words, then the end.

From that day forth, Nabob's Bar was noted as one of the most orderly and prosperous gold-camps in all southern Colorado. With the mad struggle at Idaho's Eldorado, the spirit of strife and contention ceased to exist.

In a secluded spot in the south of the camp a small stone slab marks the resting-place of Leonidas Axfell, better known in these pages as Perdido Fernandez, the escaped felon.

But, Harold Chetwynd recovered from his wounds, severe as they seemed, and with his East Indian servants returned to his ranch. Of late, he has returned to his first love, the stage, and is to-day a foot-light favorite.

His friend, Hank Hamilton, remained in the gold-camp—enslaved by the blue eyes of the major's daughter.

The Great Mogul and the Kingpin became the property of Axfell, Temple & Axfell, the last-named member of the firm being our young friend, Rollo—wholly recovered from the effects of his terrible experience with the Serpents of Cimarron.

With the breaking-up of the outlaw clan, the crimson sign of the hand and the serpent ceased to be seen.

To the honest miners of the camp, it was for months the source of a deal of solid satisfaction to recall the fact that the "Silent Tongues" formed the majority of the crime-stained party who "went over the range *v/a* Judge Lynch's halter," that moonlit night noted as the most eventful in the history of Nabob Bar.

THE END.

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